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"August"

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We would like to extend a welcome to the newest member of our editorial team. Usman Tanveer Malik joins us from Pakistan. Join us in welcoming him aboard!

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August 2003

The last couple months have been tremendous at Deep Magic, and this issue wraps up the final phase of our summer plans. By now, you have hopefully ordered your copy of *Landmoor*, which was finally released in July. It was an exciting venture for us to branch into hardcopy publishing, and *Landmoor* is only the first of many novels that we will be bringing to you.

This month we offer two new features for your enjoyment. The first is our book review section. We're starting small, but we'll work up to as many as five or six reviews per issue. We'll focus on both older classics and new releases. Following our theme of the Lamp Post (the Lamp Post Awards, by the way, will be announced next month—don't forget to vote), each review will be given a lamp post rating, similar to a traditional star rating. There will also be a note after each review for objectionable material. Since we strive to provide "safe places for minds to wander," we want you to know if the books we review are safe or questionable.

The second feature we're offering is The Geek's Guide to Grammar. Our resident Geek will offer a quick grammar lesson each month, usually taken from common mistakes seen in the submissions we receive. You also have the opportunity to ask The Geek any grammar question you have. Not only will he respond to your question, but some questions, and their answers, may be published in future issues of Deep Magic.

We are also pleased to announce the start of a new novel being serialized starting this month. *The Rise*, by Sarah Dobbs, is a wonderful journey to the dimension of Glandor, where The Grand protects the citizens against creatures from invading dimensions. We hope you enjoy the novel as much as we have. In addition, we offer our usual fare of outstanding short stories: fantasy shorts *Spells End* and *Troy of Athenia* and sci-fi short *Swarm*. Not to mention the fantastic artwork of Jeff Bedrick and Allen Douglas.

We would like to take this time to put out a call for a future issue of Deep Magic. For those who enjoy writing scarier stories, we invite you to submit your thrillers for publication in our October issue. Make them tense, make them scary—just remember to keep them clean.

Enjoy the August issue of Deep Magic. Don't hesitate to ask questions or provide feedback on our forums. We love to hear from our readers.

All the best,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication. Keep in mind that our writing challenge pieces are not edited and are usually written by amateur writers. We invite you to take us up on this month's challenge (below) by submitting your best effort by the **15th** to writingchallenge@deep-magic.net.

August 2003 Writing Challenge

Dialogue in a story can reveal character and human dynamics as much (if not more) than describing their behavior (what they do). Your challenge is this: write a dialogue scene between two people who know each other, each taking the opposite side of an issue or problem. This should be a verbal dance, not a shouting match. The issue should be something immediate (like whether to buy the enchanted Sword of Haberdashery or which fork in the road of the Forbidden Forest to take). Keep it simple and emotionally close to the two people involved. They should reveal themselves in the diaogue, meaning they should reveal more than just what the argument involves. They should reveal a little about themselves and their personality.

Make both speakers convincing–don't just load the argument one way or the other. Make each speaker unique in their language, expressions, and tone. Keep in mind the subtext of the conversation–that is, what the conversation reveals about the speakers' relationship to each other–things like power, dominance, love, antipathy, etc.

(1000 words or less)

Selections from the July 2003 Writing Challenge

Dream-Inn
At the Tavern In the Cavern
A Quarter Of a Pint
Shariati
Clearing the Counter

The above stories were selected from the submissions we received this last month. As a refresher, here is the writing challenge from last month:

The tavern. Cliche or necessary plot device? Many fantasy stories have one. You know, the place where the main character meets up with the secret informant, or the sagely mentor. (In Science Fiction, the tavern is often replaced with the off-world bar.) Does your story have one? Should it?

Write a scene in a tavern of your imagining, and don't skimp on the details. Describe the clientele, the staff, the beverages, the name, the location of the place–whatever makes it wonderful and strange. Oh, and to make it more challenging, while you're describing everything, try to give your reader a hint of mysterious goings-on as well. A meeting between wizards, a sale of intergalactic info, an exchange of messages that could mean the downfall of a kingdom or the rising of a new hero. Put a little description, and a little story, into 500 words or less, and let us visit the tavern in your mind.

Dream-Inn

By Raymond Ibrahim

Though the quality of taverns was in decline, happily there yet remained some lively and hospitable remnants stretching across the lands. Such was the quaint and mystical tavern, aptly called "Dream-Inn." It was a goodly place, and its hospitality—not to mention its meat, mead, and merriment—had won it great renown with those whose own fame has steadily dwindled: the original inhabitants of time and thought, whose names now are little more than legend.

Dream-Inn's structure was somewhat amorphous—instead of walls, the outer edges of the bar were shrouded in fog and mist—and the barkeep's ever-lit smoking pipe supplanted the roof with its thin, wispy, cirrus-cloud like emanations. Otherwise, everything else was standard: oaken tables atop dusty wooden floors were scattered everywhere; mugs and flagons were ubiquitous.

The centerpiece of the tavern, whence all warmth and light issued, was the now blazing hearth, which was forever tended by a shadowy dragon known as the Dream-Drake. As the night waned, the fire correspondingly grew in blaze, and, in response, the tavern-folk became more animated and alive: now drinking and laughing; now arguing and quarreling. Customarily, it would continue in this manner until just before the Master returned (though, considering that he got a late start departing tonight, it was almost certain that he wouldn't return till well after daybreak).

Old Muse, the barkeep and long time friend of the Master, was bustling about. Gnarled with old age, and adorned with a haggard, white beard, he was nonetheless a light and merry spirit. Still, it was often remarked that, among all the inhabitants of the lands, Muse possessed a certain profundity; for it was only he who was in direct contact (albeit metaphysically) with the Master, thus existing simultaneously in two dimensions.

The night waxed, the hearth-fire blazed, and the inhabitants came alive: shrouded in a green mist that suggested the emerald-green woods, a group of elves and other wood-folk were singing softly. In a stone-gray corner, a company of mail-clad dwarves, mumbling furtively in their beards, sat drinking and fingering their gold. Further off, and behind some red mist, Oftang the ogre and his goblin sidekicks were croaking harshly as they drained their mugs and boasted of their latest raids. And in a particularly cold, black corner sat dark fellows—wraiths and sorcerers—whispering words of woe to their Dark Lord (who the Master, unofficially, admired).

And so it continued in this way until, once again with the coming of the dawn, the onetime highly animated and fantastic patrons began to slowly lose shape, becoming one with the surrounding mist-walls, which, in their turn likewise began fading away until everything—tavern, patrons, and beer—was no more.

All that remained was the essence of old man Muse, stripped of his corporeality: Ray, the Master, had just returned—had just awoken—and would soon be summoning the Muse to recount to him the doings of his patrons before continuing to write his latest novel.

At the Tavern In the Cavern

By A.M. Stickel

In the sealed lowest half-mile of Earth's Night Land Redoubt, the newcomer shivered in the cold dark passage. He had no memory of his arrival. The coarse gray tunic he wore gave not a clue. He willed his heartbeat slower, and took deep, calming breaths of air befouled by mildew. Drawn by its faint glow, he entered the nearest doorway, joining the loud but shadowy clientele. The Inverted Pyramid assured privacy with the low light provided by its dripping phosphorescent walls and ceiling.

The conversational din around him continued unabated as the man made his uncertain way to the bar. Its burly keeper looked up and nodded at his misshapen helper, addressing the room with a rag's swipe at the synthi-slab, "The Mind Monitors have blessed another noble offender with new life, a soft one who mightn't live long enough to enjoy it."

"Please tell me where I am, Sir," said the pale young newcomer, shrinking away from the helper.

"Jeni," said the keeper to his helper, "bring this man his memory. I don't have much time to deal with drifters. But this one might prove entertaining."

Jeni, her small lumpy form covered in a gray hooded robe, shuffled off through a sagging doorway behind the bar and returned with a large golden mushroom in her knobby hand. When she thrust it out toward the stranger, he backed away with a gasp.

"Were I you, I'd eat up, soft man, and learn what makes me the Mushroom King," the keeper rasped, narrowing his yellow eyes.

The newcomer wiped the mushroom on his shabby tunic, and obeyed. His nose wrinkled in disgust at the acrid taste and slimy texture of his first bite. The King, hands on ample hips, waited with a big grin on his red face, while Jeni moved off to help one of the regulars. She didn't stay to see the newcomer's reaction.

Haltayne remembered who he'd been. He remembered why the Mind Monitors had come for him: he was a heretic who had dared to use his science to acquire a maid's affections. He'd not loved her, only desired her, then been caught just as he was about to have his way with her. Next thing he knew he was standing, deprived of his thick mane of brown hair, in the dank passage outside The Inverted Pyramid, exiled to the sealed off caverns of Lower Redoubt.

His host stated the obvious. "Maybe it's better not to know, eh ... soft man? Welcome to Lower."

Haltayne didn't reply until swiftly considering his options. Literally holding his fate in his hand, he examined his "memory"… turning it over and over. Resolute, he took another nauseating bite and his next step toward salvation.

"D'you grow these yourself?" asked Haltayne, waving the mushroom remnant. "I'm Haltayne, and I remain a scientist, one who can improve the flavor of memory to enhance your reign."

"Jeni, bring WATER!" roared the smiling King. "We've a partnership to toast."

A Quarter Of a Pint

By Amy Butler

It was a run down little place, squashed between the butcher's and the apothecary. The windows were frosted to keep our peering eyes. I could barely make out the sign nailed beside the door. The words were too faded to read the name. I didn't even think it had a name.

"You sure this is the right place?"

I glared at my companion. "Do you think I'd forget in me old age, boy?"

I knocked on the door four times. It opened a crack, and a pair of eyes set deep into a craggy face stared at me.

"What choo want?" he said.

"Only a quarter of a pint," I replied.

The man nodded and opened the door wider for us. As we hurried inside, my companion whispered, "But nobody sells a quarter of a pint."

I ignored him, glancing around the tavern instead. Some of the usuals were hanging around, but most of the beer drinkers were unrecognizable, huddled together in groups and talking into their ale mugs.

A serving wench was walking by with a tray loaded down with fragrant foods. I nodded to her respectfully. "Your highness."

She raised cool blue eyes and a brief smile flickered across her lips. My companion gawked.

"Who is she?"

"Exiled princess of Eltanor," I said. "She's raising an army to take back her kingdom. Last time I heard, she had near ten thousand men.

"And there-" I pointed discreetly to where a young girl sat talking to two men in dark hooded cloaks. "- the minstrel is Morel, the one who wrote the ballad that unthroned King Ultar."

"Wow," the boy said openly staring.

I grunted. "And that was a paying job. You should hear what she can compose when she's inspired. Only time I've ever cried."

We passed a few more groups of people. Korbin the Killer, a wry man smoking a pipe. He had a curved scimitar strapped to his hip, but I knew he had more subtle ways of assassinating people.

There was a mad old man I had never bothered to learn the name of. He was raving to two fellows, something about catching leprechauns and stealing their gold. Fool, he had been ranting that same story the day I walked in fifteen years ago.

We took a seat. My friend ogled at Katherine the Red, resplendent in her scarlet cape. I kicked him under the table. The last thing we needed was for him to get himself enchanted again.

"Don't drink the ale," I said as I grabbed two mugs of the stuff off the exiled princess's serving tray, placing one in front of the boy.

"Why?"

I snorted. "With your low tolerance, you'll be out cold before the others even sit down."

I slid my dagger out of my arm sheath. Just a precaution. These were old colleagues, and I

continued on next page

certainly didn't trust them.

The door opened and three men in shining mail and green cloaks entered. I nodded at them.

"There they are."

Shariati

By McKenna Foster

The words on the stained wooden sign had faded into near oblivion, but Archard squinted until the letters took shape: FEROUN.

"The Feroun? What kind of name is that?"

"I believe it's Flentish, my lord." Gabon sniffed and cocked his head. "It means…cow drool."

"You're joking!"

"Actually, you're right. I don't remember what it means. Judging by the smell, I hardly care."

Archard grit his teeth and shoved the door. It stuck and he had to shoulder it open and nearly tripped. A few guffaws bubbled up from the patrons, until they saw him – the Prince of Torryen – and promptly stared back into chipped mugs and dishes lathered in waxy gravy. Flies helped themselves to the dishes and to the spilled puddles of wine staining the floor.

The floor! Archard wasn't sure where to step first. He jerked his head for Gabon to follow and they entered together. Chicken bones cracked and snapped as he walked across the haze of woodsmoke and pipe and gagged at the raw yeasty flavor that rose like a cloud from two tables. There were mostly soldiers preparing for the war with Westerness. Some still had their teeth too. Bristled chins and scowls met him. Two tankards clashed to his left, making him grab for his sword.

"You're embarrassing yourself," Gabon whispered in his ear. "There's a table to the right. No one's sitting there. Go."

Archard scowled back, wondering how many of these faces he'd see sprawled dead on a muck-muddied field in northern Torryen. He ground his teeth and maneuvered past a snoring boar hound, praying it didn't rouse and bite him.

The table was empty, of course, because there were no chairs left around it. Archard stared at the empty spaces, wondering what madness had persuaded him to come to such a hovel. But he already knew the answer. A honey-haired girl named Paixe.

"You, Hesp and Haron. Het off those hairs and let our lordships hit. Move on! Move on, I say!"

Two soldiers wearing the cloaks and colors of Torryen grudgingly obeyed the wide-paunched barman. They stood and shoved away from their crowded table. Gabon tossed them two soux and their eyes lit up.

"Night, my lords," one of them said, clucking his tongue and they sauntered over to another table.

The mutter and rumble of the inn lumbered back to life.

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"Hut can I het you, my lords?" the barman asked.

"What did he say?" Archard hissed to Gabon.

Gabon motioned the man closer.

The barman inclined his head, his teeth nibbling on his bottom lip.

Gabon's voice was low. "We're here to see the witch Shariati. For a charm."

The man's mustache quivered. He scratched his stomach. "Hi dunno hut your askin…I hain't know any…"

Archard slid ten soux across the table and three flies took flight.

A rotting smile. "Has you wishes, my lordships. Has you wishes."

Clearing The Counter

By Johne Cook

They found him at what used to be a popular local watering shack on the edge of the great plains. It had two levels, waxed windows, and (from the looks of the horses at the rail) only one customer.

"He's sitting there at Flemming's Counter", Mik said, nodding at the drinking hut.

Rim wasted no time. His saddle creaked loudly as he leaned forward, preparing to dismount.

Mik moved fast for a big man, quickly reaching over and touching Rim's shoulder, stopping him short.

"You don't want to go in there just yet," he said, quietly.

Rim restrained himself with an exaggerated flourish and looked around at the little group: Brindy, on the mare, Flaerich on the Arrabean (complete with flashy red silks), Mik on the big plowhorse, and Kish, on the stallion.

"Why not? This is one man. What does he have that we don't?"

Flaerich fielded that one with his droll, "this is boring me" tone while giving his best appearance of examining his dandified riding crop. "Thorten is something of a local legend, infamous for having a long sword and a short temper. The word is that Flemming is afraid to deny him entry or bid him leave, so Thorten has the run of the place for now. He won't talk, he won't leave, and there's not enough room in there for all of us and Thornton's sword as well."

Flaerich fixed Rim with his sharp gaze. "Mik just saved your life again," he said.

Rim ignored that. His horse moved forward, nervously, and had to be reined in. "So what do we do now?", he demanded, as restless as his mount.

The top half of the door was open to the drinking hut to admit the breeze and discharge the smoke.

Kish started to move but Brindy was faster. She was out of her saddle and halfway to the door before he knew it, flashing her honey-sweet smile to let them know it was ok, she turned as she walked and gave them a gesture that clearly meant "stay put" and "Boys, leave this to me". She turned smoothly, opened the bottom door, and drew both halves closed after her, holding Kish's gaze until she was inside.

The men exchanged nervous glances (except for Flaerich, who returned his attention to his

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crop).

Rim was never one to let silence gather too thick. "Why did we let her come along," he asked no-one in particular.

"Because she would have beaten each of us roundly if we didn't", mused Mik. Kish grinned.

In the hut, there was sudden muffled sound of quickly moving drinking stools followed by a loud scratching at the doors. A man with long, greasy hair finally flung open the door and stumbled out into the light, one arm shielding his eyes from the sun and the back hand of his other covering his nose and mouth. He tripped and went down on a knee, coughing.

Brindy breezed out of the hut, plucking the man's sword from its sheath with one smooth motion, and presented it to Kish hilt first as she passed by.

"For you," she said.

"Ach, what *was* that?" demanded the man, drawing in huge, wracking breaths of air. "What died in there?"

"Master Thornten, I presume?" said Kish, lazily playing with the long sword.

Thorten looked up at him and saw the silhouette of man and horse. "Who wants to know?" he gasped, struggling to stand.

"My name is Kish, and these are my friends. I believe you've already met Brindy," he said dryly. Kish urged his horse a couple of steps forward.

"Let's talk about the Plains Pirates," he said, extending the hilt of the sword and a small bag of coin.

Thorten looked at the offering for a moment and then rose to his feet, taking the bag and the sword.

"Inside," he said after a moment, "assuming it's safe to breathe."

"Oh, that won't be aproblem," Brindy said, sweetly.

"How's that," asked Kish as they dismounted.

"As we went out the front door, Master Flemming went out the back window. There's a good breeze going through there now, I expect."

"What do you feed her," groused Thornten as the trudged inside.

Rim pushed by with a huge grin. "You don't want to know," he mock-whispered as he ducked inside.

Survey
The Lamp Post Awards

The staff at Deep Magic has decided to create a "best of Deep Magic" award. Over the last year, we have brought you some of the best and brightest stories, articles, and artwork available in the world. We would like to recognize these authors and artists by picking one from each category as being the "best" for the year. After doing a little research and discussing it as a staff, we have decided to name this prestigious award: The Lamp Post Awards.

We decided to pay homage once again to C.S. Lewis and his influence on our view of fantasy and science fiction. But it also has connotations beyond the worlds that Lewis created. Over the last year, Deep Magic has been a beacon drawing in new, formerly unrecognized talent.

We need you, our readers, to vote on the finalists. Here is how the process works. The editorial staff recommended our favorite stories in each category: Fantasy Fiction stories, Science Fiction stories, Articles, and Best Artwork. We would like you to visit our poll page on the website and cast your vote for your favorite pieces. You have all summer to do so - voting poll ends on August 15. That will give you some time to read any stories you may have missed. All of these represent the best that Deep Magic has offered over the last year. Now it is time to pick the best of the best.

The winner in each category will receive the prestigious Lamp Post Award. We'll keep it a secret what that will be until the winners are announced in our September issue.

Feel free to use the Message Board to try and win other readers to your way of thinking. We're sure the authors and artists would enjoy the feedback too.

Fantasy Short Story

Birth Of a Hero by Steve Westcott (Feb 2003)
Bliss: A Fairy Tale by Steven Richards (Nov 2002)
Disappearing by Lori Erickson (Oct 2002)
Jase's Challenge by Clover Autrey (Mar 2003)
Maia by JT Slane (Oct 2002)
Mortal Amusement by Brendon Taylor (Sep 2002)
Skygrave by Margo Lerwill (Apr 2003)
Slaying the Dragon by M. Thomas (Aug 2002)
The King of Wolvmeadow by Peter Dahl (Jun 2002)

SciFi short story

A Taste Of Earth by Darrell Newton (May 2003)
Andie and I by Ryan Peterson (Jul 2002)
Cinder-Relic by Melva Gifford (Dec 2002)
Kylaan Zn by Ian Fulton Roberts (Nov 2002)
Oranges and Lemons by Ays Marin (Mar 2003)
Prometheus' Tears by Mark Reeder (Feb 2003)
Refuge by Reuben Fox (Jun 2002)
What Power In a Word? by Alexander R. Brown (Aug 2002)

Artist

Christophe Vacher "The Source" (July 2002)
Ciruelo Cabral "Cadmo" (November 2002)
Donato Giancola "Dragonflight" (December 2002)
Geoff Taylor "Sacred Seven" (April 2003)
Jonathon Earl Bowser "A Dark Knight" (June 2002)
Kinuko Craft "Scent of Magic" (February 2003)
Les Edwards "The List of Seven" (January 2003)
Ted Nasmith "Luthien" (May 2003)

Article

A Tale Told By An Idiot by Gary Allen
Fantasy and Cliches by Robin Hobb
Harry Potter Goes to Court by Brendon Taylor
Notes About the Sword by M. Thomas
On Writing by Rob Sawyer
Tale Of a Talent Gone Good by Charles Finlay
The Economics Of Being a Fantasy Author by Jeff Wheeler
Why Do People Read Fiction? by David Farland

Go to the website and vote!

Our poll is sponsored by csPoller. They provided us a great poll script, so please go to their site and check out their great scripts. They offer a wide selection of quality cgi-scripts, and their support is fantastic.

Troy of Athenia

by Brian W. Keen

In a land not so far from here, called Athenia, there lived a young man whose name was Troy. Troy was a slender, handsome man. He came from a wealthy family, who bestowed all of this worldly wealth upon him after their untimely deaths. There were no siblings to speak of, and so Troy had to share this large inheritance with no one, which suited him fine.

Being young and stupid, Troy spent his family's fortune, which had taken a lifetime to earn, in a matter of years. He wore only the finest garments. He rode only on the backs of the royal bred horses. His wines were aged with precision and only of the finest quality. His women were young and beautiful. Their time with him was always short-lived. When Troy tired of one fair maiden, another more strikingly beautiful would appear, as if by magic. Weeping women were often seen leaving Troy's castle holding a small sack of coins which Troy gave them as severance.

But alas, one spring like day Troy awoke to the sight of his accountant by his bedside.

"Troy, I am sorry to inform you that your fortune is no longer," the accountant said, trying to seem sincere.

"Troy, I am sorry to inform you that your fortune is no longer," the accountant said, trying to seem sincere.

"How is this possible?" Troy asked. "Why didn't you come to me sooner?" he demanded.

"I tried, my lord, but you always told me to come back another time. 'I haven't time for it' you said on several occasions."

Troy scratched his head, perplexed about his present situation.

"Will that be all, my lord?" the accountant asked.

"I imagine it will," Troy answered.

The accountant left the room, a large smile that would exist the better part of the day decorating his face. Troy rose up from his large, hand-crafted wooden bed.

"How can this be?" he said aloud into the empty room. "Me a peasant.....relegated to.....work?"

Troy spent the entire day and much of the night pondering a solution for this unfortunate calamity. He did not relish the idea of any sort of manual labor. His hands were not built for that. There was no particular trade he excelled at, nor cared to learn. He could never be a servant, not with his temperament. A thief was out of the question. He was neither conniving nor fleet of hand. There must be an easier way, he thought. Then in the wee hours of the night, he remembered it.

On his thirteenth birthday, his mother had given him a great, ancient gold-colored bottle with silver shilling stripes and a large emerald pearl lid. Troy's mother, Clarabella, was given the bottle by an old woman rumored to practice witchcraft, just before the old lady's death. Clarabella had been a nurse before she met Troy's father. She had taken care of the old lady when others had refused. For this kind deed, the lady had given her the bottle.

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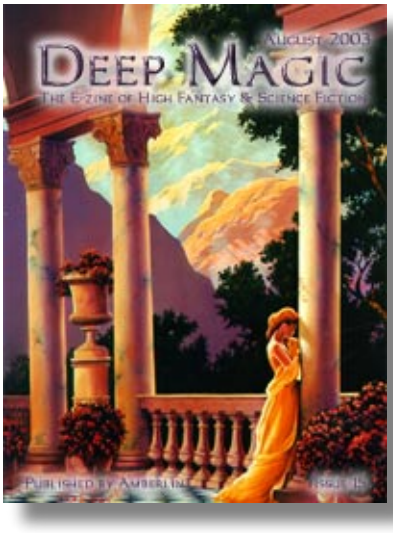
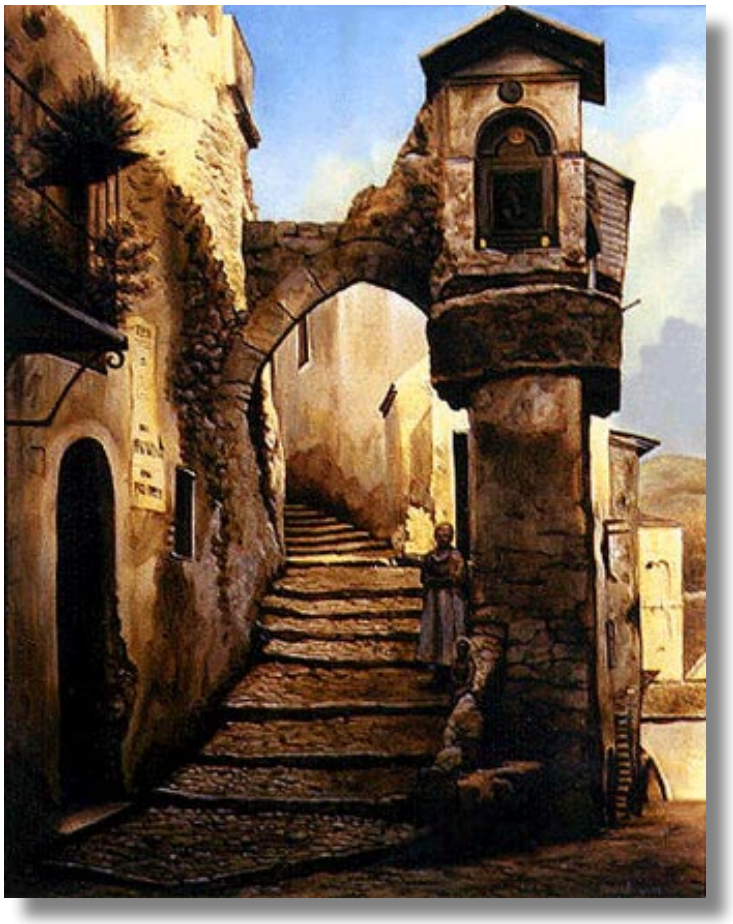
Featured Artist
Jeffrey K. Bedrick



Age: 42
Residence: Pasadena, CA
Marital Status: Married
Children: One daughter (two yrs. old)
Hobbies: Reading, writing, crossword puzzles, hang gliding, raquetball, shooting pool, etc.
Personal Quote: "Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible." Paul Klee
Favorite Authors: Carl Jung, P.D. Ouspensky, Ralph Waldo Emerson, H.P. Lovecraft, Lewis Carroll, Harlan Ellison, Stephen King, etc.
Started Painting In: Childhood
Artists Most Inspired By: Maxfield Parrish, Gustave Klimt, Frederick Church, MANY others.
Media You Work In: All traditional and digital media, but most of my paintings are oil on canvas.
Schools Attended: San Francisco State University as a film major.
Other Training: Private painting apprenticeship with renowned artist, Gage Taylor.
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: Too numerous to list but major galleries in San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Tokyo. See the bio page of my website for a complete list.
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art:
http://jeffreykbedrick.com/prints.htm
Contact: jbedrick@earthlink.net
Website: http://jeffreykbedrick.com

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: My childhood aptitude for drawing and painting carried over into adulthood with a big boost in my teen years during a private apprenticship with artist, Gage Taylor. While still studying with him, I began to receive invitations to exhibit my work professionally.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: I have done art in virtually every conceivable style, but my most popular work would probably be described as "Mythical Realsim", "Fantastic Realism", or "Visionary". The most consistent themes in my work are usually "the romantic ideal" and a kind of Emersonian vision of Nature as a spiritual continuum.



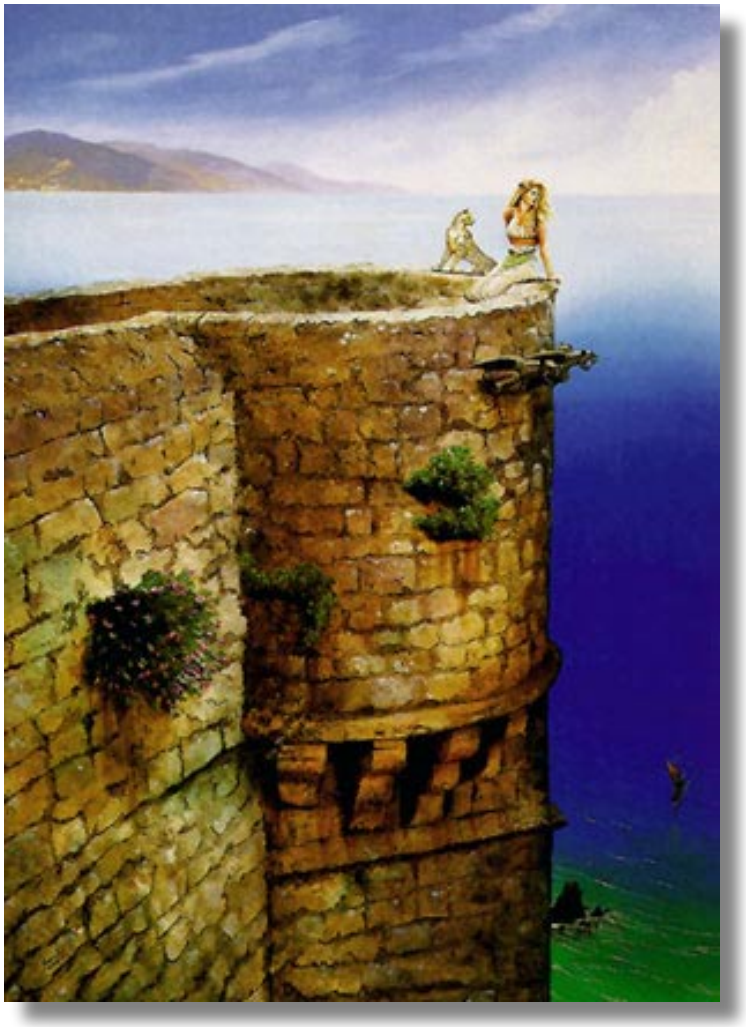
Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: Inspiration (to create) for me starts with a simple matter of taste. I keep a reference library of images that I like, and then try to find new ways of compositing and embellishing them into something new and interesting.

Q: What inspired this piece? ("August")
A: This painting started with a simple picture that I found of a woman leaning against a pillar. The background wasn't very interesting but I liked the pose and the warm colors. I reversed and extended the architecture, and then added the Parrish-like mountains and trees. The overall palette was warmer than most of my paintings, so I titled it "August".

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: There are too many to list, but I have been influenced at different times by the masters from almost every period of European art starting with the Renaissance up through the great American illustrators of the 20th century.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: If I were to name one single event, it would probably be my 1994 Tokyo exhibit, but the cumulative success is being able to provide for my family.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: There are artists who are always pushing the limits of violent and sexual content in the pop fantasy art that evolved from comics. However, I am less concerned with subject matter than I am with quality. The work of artists like Giger or Brom is sometimes disturbing, but it is always superbly done. There is also the ongoing tradition of surreal and spiritual art that has roots in European fine art. I have actually been doing art in the computer game industry for the last few years, so I see many developments in that medium as technology improves. Ultimately, I think that the best work is often done these days by lesser-known concept artists working in the entertainment industries. As film and computer technology moves closer toward producing the ultimate immersive/interactive experience, talented artists will be there to breathe life into these exciting new mediums.



Notes on Two Types of Writers, In Case You Are One of Them

By M. Thomas

"Narrative is not plot."
—John Gregory Dunne

Of course it's impossible to strictly categorize fantasy writers into two little categories. I never knew she was completely bonkers, I hear some of you saying. I never knew she was a *she*, I hear some others saying. That's a whole other article.

I have come to the belief that there are two *primary* types of fantasy writers. Though there are a thousand combinations, ultimately most fantasy writers can honestly say they may at least *lean* more toward one category than the other. The first of these is the writer who chooses fantasy as their genre. The second of these is the fantasy buff who chooses writing as their creative outlet. Both have their flaws, but both deserve recognition, and some (hopefully) helpful analysis. Having said that, I'll begin by deconstructing my own category, in case anyone's gotten huffy about being called flawed. Next month we'll work with fantasy buffs, HOWEVER…the two types often intermingle a bit, so the exercises in both articles can benefit both groups.

The Writer Who Chooses Fantasy

You might be a writer who:
• Reads widely in many genres, and very possibly avoids fantasy in order to avoid any unintentional "taint."
• Can spell "antidisestablishmentarianism" out loud, and tell people what all the prefixes and suffixes mean, thereby getting to the root meaning of the word. Sometimes you do this as a party trick.
• Believe the words "love" and "hate" are trite sentimentalities that would be much better represented by a few reams of eloquent narrative in which phrases like "trite sentimentalities" figure heavily.

I'll admit I read a healthy dose of literature as a child. My mother was a librarian, and she was always bringing books home, as librarians have a habit of doing. A lot of them were fantasy. But, it wasn't the genre for me so much as the words. Oh, those words! Those beautiful, tangled words, shimmying up the poles of my consciousness like vines upon which sprouted the subtlest and boldest of meanings with which I was invited to weave tapestries of knowing and delight!

You see what I mean about the words? They get to me. Puzzling them out and putting them on paper just the right way…like chess or gardening or a bunch of other similes. It's the words that got to me, and how they hinted at deeper things.

Well, I got good and full of them, and myself, I'll admit it. And spent quite a few years writing copious imitations of my favorite authors, as beginning writers often do. It's one of the

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learning phases of writing. You have to go through it to find your voice, but most writers get over it if they keep writing long enough. Have I? I don't know. I can definitely see that elusive "voice" writers strive for coming through in *some* of my writing now. But only within the past year or so, and it's taken me nearly two decades to get this far.

Writers who choose fantasy are often so in love with the words (narrative) that they cannot see the picture. They may write a well-plotted story or novel, but it's often bogged down in that same love for language. Pages upon pages of exposition, both flowery and didactic, seeking to explain the minutia of human emotions and drama in flowery phrases that will make a reader weep. Case in point: "Found Things."

By now some of you may have read it. And let me assure you the work went through several readings (not all of them by me) before being run in Deep Magic. And still, I went too far. Missing takes herself much too seriously, and so did I when I wrote it. About half that didactic, soulful exposition you read has been cut out now, for the final version (and some may still say not enough). Because it wasn't *needed*. It was just the lingering remnants of a love of language that became a little fatuous after a while. I got so caught up in explaining things, I forgot about the story. Author B. R. Myers, in his article "A Reader's Manifesto," laments writers "…who are deliberately obscure, or who chant in strange cadences." For those of us with a love of words, this is all too easy a trap to fall into. I did.

What writers who choose fantasy generally *have* is a good command of language and structure. They know how to put words together well. They know where most of the commas go. They often, though not always, know how to start a story and end it.

What they often *need* is the willingness to follow that heart-breaking command: "murder your darlings." And that's a toughy. It comes with time, and experience, and a sort of authorial distance in which one can stand back from a finished work, sigh deeply with satisfaction, and then dive back in thinking, "that's too much, and *that's* too much, and if I take that out nothing really important is lost except my pride."

What they (we) need, is to learn to tell a story simply, and trust their reader's imagination more. As another one of my invaluable critics once said about Found Things:

> "…the action parts tended to be much more grabbing than some of the longer narrative sections (i.e. descriptions of places, etc)…There were places where I found myself skimming a bit after several pages of exposition, but mostly I think because I wanted to get back to the character interactions…"

It was good advice, and some of you who have read the novel may agree. I keep it posted next to my computer. Cut the narrative, get back to the characters. As for me, I'm getting there. My narrative pride is bruised and bleeding, but I've got the liniment of time to soothe it. For writers who choose fantasy, the biggest challenge is often simplicity, and trusting the reader.

Finding Simplicity

It's difficult. Writers who choose fantasy must find simplicity in their narrative. Do away with the desire to pontificate page after page on setting, emotion, and authorial commentary. Here's an exercise in simplicity for writers of both types. Describe your character in all his or her

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aspects. Go on, write for pages. Elucidate and elaborate to your heart's content. Now.

Describe your character in ten words or less, and it has to be a complete sentence! Here's mine:

Missing Sealyham is dreamy, considered unattractive, and hates change.

Okay. Now describe your character's adversity. Again, go on for pages. No one's counting. Then, describe that same adversity in—I'll give you some leeway here—twenty words or less. Again, complete sentences.

Missing must discover the cause of tremors that threaten the stability of the city she loves.

Whew! Came in just under the wire both times. If I can do it, you can too. And therein lies simplicity. Not enough room for an abundance of exposition. If what you've written here doesn't indicate a complete story, then you don't have one. Missing hates change, yet she has to uncover the root of something that is causing change in her world. It's a plot, boiled down. Go on, try it. Novel or short story, it doesn't matter. This was the hardest lesson for me to learn, and I *still* fight it the way I fought my nightly dose of broccoli as a kid.

But *yes*, you can do this for your novel, no matter how complex the subplots are, no matter how many characters you've got, no matter how epic the novel. If you can't, you don't have a good grasp on what you're doing just yet. If you can't, you're going to have a hard time pitching it to an agent or publisher or editor who has approximately 45 seconds to read your query letter before tossing it into the slush.

Trusting Your Reader

In this day and age, people who choose reading as a form of entertainment over all the others generally have well-developed imaginations. They don't need to be fed the pabulum of over-excessive description. You're a reader, aren't you? Think about what you are able to imagine as you read this:

Amadogwa's hand reached out, scraping against the edge of the pit. For one moment, it seemed he might find a grasp. Then his fingers closed on loose shale, and he fell into the fire. His wail would echo in Romar's dreams for a long time.

"Thus it ends," Romar said.

As a reader, do you need me to fill in any details? You really don't need me to say:

Amadogwa's hand reached out, desperately scraping against the glassy-sharp edge of the ominous, sucking pit as if he were a crab seeking purchase. For one brief, endless moment, it seemed he might find a sure grasp on some tangible bit of earth that would be his savior. Then his clawed fingers closed on loose shale, and he fell,

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tumbling over and over, into the unforgiving fire of retribution that lay far below. His piercing wail of raging despair would echo in Romar's sweat-drenched dreams for years to come, that leftover remnant of memory refusing to leave his subconscious even while wrapped in silken sheets and curled up against the velvety thigh of his lady love, Persimmon.

"Thus it ends," he seethed, his breath escaping his teeth like the fumes of a dragon.

I'd be willing to bet money you just skimmed that paragraph. Despite these examples, I would cautiously submit that the first is too simple, and the second too lavish. Is there a happy medium? Of course there is. So here's an exercise for you.

Take a passage of writing in which you feel you have really outdone yourself. Don't choose a problem area! Choose something you're proud of. The bruising hurts a little more that way, but it's also cathartic. Choose a passage (about a paragraph's length) in which your narrative exposition transcends literary expression and will probably be recognized as genius for generations to come.

Now the process.

1.Take out all the similes and metaphors. I know it's hard, but you can do it.
2.Take out any character-oriented ruminations on memories, the experience, comparisons to life lessons, and etc.
3.Take out any "saidisms." Any dialogue tag that says anything other than "said."

Now the revision.

1.Look at what you have left. You may add back in one simile or metaphor. Make it count. Make sure it isn't a cliché.
2.You may add back in one character rumination. Make it count, and make sure it isn't just a re-hashed version of what you had before, only now you've tried to squeeze it all into one so you wouldn't have to get rid of any of it. Trust me, I know how you are.
3.You **may not** put back in any saidisms. Repeat after me: saidisms are evil, until I am a best-selling author. If you don't believe me, go back and read "Said Bookisms," she Growled," by Margo Lerwill, in the May edition of Deep Magic.

What you have left is not the end-all, be-all of your writing efforts. You may need to play with it some more, because that's what the writing is all about. Fitzing and putzing until you have the perfect combination for an un-rejectable story. Then, take a deep breath, and do the same for another portion. And on, and on, until it becomes automatic as you write. Here's what I got:

Amadogwa's hand reached out, scraping against the edge of the sucking pit. For one moment, it seemed he might find a sure grasp. Then his fingers closed on shale, and

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he fell into the fire. Romar's dreams would echo with that wail for years to come, despite the gentle comfort of Lady Persimmon.

"Thus it ends," he said.

Still needs work though. Finally, the toughest advice. When you've played with it all so much that you have lost all objectivity, put it away. Playing with it too much isn't going to do you any good. You can only re-arrange the puzzle pieces so many ways. If the picture doesn't immediately come clear, you've played too much. My very first sale was for a story I put away for 5 years. Sounds incredible? It's true. You may think yourself too impatient to wait that long, but let me say, it was the best thing I ever did.

Next up: Fantasy buffs. We'll talk a little more about Romar and his predicament there. And writers who choose fantasy, don't think you're off the hook yet! Until then, good writing.

http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2001/07/myers.htm

The End

Swarm
By A.J. Thompson

Good evening, my little vultures. It's five-o, which means it's time for your Uncle Mackie to deliver his usual evening rant. As most of you probably know, the end of August marks the onset of firefly season. No, we're not talking the cute little bioluminescent beetles that flutter around your mamas' backyards just so you can have the privilege of catching them in a jar for Show and Tell the next day. We're talking translucent fairies, angels, Aurora Borealis—any unexplained phenomenon that has yet to be officially documented by the scientific community, as well as the news media.

"That said, I want us to break in on the ground floor this year. I want real footage, real samples, real reports concerning these babies, and I'm offering front-page real estate to the first danger hunters' club that provides me with just that. No fuzzy black screens with a couple random pixels in the center; no digitally-enhanced percolations gathered from your mommies' toilet bowls; no sleekly-edited video clips from Alien Insider made to look they came from your own computers. This is the big time.

"Oh, and Hagar—your human piglet story has been debunked."

A collective chuckle filled the interior of the Goblin's Club PC Cafe. Behind three aisles of idle PC terminals, Mackie Davidson, the cafe's one and only admin, leaned casually against the information desk and addressed his audience: two dozen registered danger hunters, all sitting cross-legged on the bare floor. Most were in their late teens or early twenties—high school and college students come to trade stories, gather information, and post news concerning their respective clubs' current assignments.

She's seen many swarms before, just like many people probably have. The reported cases are a minority when compared to the number of sightings that are simply written off as flukes or coincidences.

Alyssa Newman and her club partners, Vanessa O'Brien and Carl Hanson, (all considerably younger than the majority) lounged together at the rear of the crowd. Despite their youthful physical appearances, the only things really setting them apart from their older counterparts were their DHC emblems, which were made of carved wood instead of silver. That and the fact that, having traveled to the cafe using their airblades, they weren't wearing any shoes.

"I can do it, Ness," Carl whispered, grinning devilishly. He feigned attention as Mackie continued with his lecture.

"No you can't," replied Vanessa.

"Yes, I can. Wanna see?"

"Yeah, I do, but I still think you're gonna screw it up."

Alyssa, wearing a rather serious expression, lifted her gaze from her PDA momentarily and glared at her quarrelsome companions. "Vanessa. Carl. Shh! You're gonna get us kicked out."

Carl leaned over, twirling a small neon-orange hyper yoyo in his hands. "Nessa doesn't

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New York Field Trip (part 2): Betsy at Bantam Dell

By Jeff Wheeler

In my article last month, I shared part of my experience visiting the staff at Bantam Dell in New York City and discussed the business of the publishing industry (from a fantasy fiction point of view). A crucial aspect of business is marketing, and I don't just say that to justify the three grueling years I spent getting an MBA. Well, maybe a little.

A writer finishes a novel and tactfully submits it for publication. The stars align and the right editor ends up with the manuscript and the decision to publish it is made. Laying out the manuscript, getting the cover art, drafting the contract—these are all elements of the business of turning those creative keyboard strokes into a published novel. Marketing is another logical step.

During my trip to New York, I spent some time in the office of Betsy Hulsebosch, VP and creative marketing director at Bantam Dell. We discussed some of the issues of marketing a book by a new author compared with an author who is already established. We talked about galley proofs, free copies, core competencies of a major publishing house versus a self-published author, segmenting the market, and the internet versus brick-and-mortar stores. I managed to wring a confession from her throughout the process. I asked how she could tell which marketing strategies were the most effective. The answer? There is no real way to judge sales driven by marketing.

What?

There is no real way to judge sales driven by marketing.

Then why do publishing companies have a marketing department? Why do marketing at all? What kind of mumbo jumbo business chicanery…hold on there, you're getting too excited. Don't forget, my MBA focus was in strategic marketing. Look at it this way. There are many variables that go into a book's success. It wasn't pure marketing prowess that made JK Rowling richer than the Queen. What this is showing is that it isn't necessarily possible to separate marketing's role discretely from the overall results. I'm not saying it has *no impact* on sales.

Time for a crash course in marketing economics in the publishing industry. In my last article, I explained that the publishing industry was approximately a $40 billion dollar industry. You may not know this, but the advertising industry in the United States is a $215 billion dollar industry. Of that amount, book publishers make up $160 million. That's less than ten percent, and it involves *all* publishing, of which genre fiction is another wee percentage. Let's face it—radio ads, television spots, and newspaper layouts are expensive marketing outlets. If publishers had to use these venues for all their books, they might never find their target audience.

A target audience is, for lack of a better explanation, you—the readers of Deep Magic. You like fantasy books. And where do you find out about the latest novel by your favorite author? From USA TODAY? I doubt it.

What Betsy explained to me is that best results of marketing come by understanding the target audience profile. Yes, you have a profile. So do I. For example, I like Terry Brooks, Robin Hobb, and Cecilia Dart-Thornton. I don't particularly care for George R.R. Martin, Elizabeth

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Haydon, or (sorry Brendon) Robert Jordan. I may have lost credibility with some of you and gained some with others. Not every piece of genre fiction appeals to every person. So the magic and high adventure in a Brooks novel will not appeal to everyone. Some prefer the nuances of words. A marketing person, Betsy said, needs to find out the following when they prepare a strategy for XYZ new novel by ABC new author:

1. Who is the most likely reader?
2. Where does that person shop for books?
3. Where do I want that person to find this book?
4. How can I best alert that person that the book is available?
5. What do I want to say about the book?

These may sound pretty simple, but keeping them in focus while putting together a successful marketing strategy is crucial and difficult. The answers change depending on the tone of the book. Granted, bookstore chains like Barnes & Noble carry hundreds of titles. But certain readers who like certain kinds of fantasy fiction may shop more frequently at a hobby store than at B&N. Or maybe you are like me and buy all your books on-line so long as you can finagle free shipping (buy two at BN.com and shipping is free, even if they are both paperbacks…a better deal than Amazon's $25 minimum order…but I digress).

Think back about how you found out about Deep Magic. Did we find you? Did a friend tell you about us? Did you stumble across us during a Google search? Did you find a link from another site and happen to drop by?

All of these are marketing strategies—opportunities to make you aware that a product or service you care about is available. Some of you are attracted here because we promote "safe places for minds to wander." And why do we do that? Because that is the kind of fiction we care about and want to promote. We want more authors writing more stories like that.

So publishers tend to know (especially the big publishing houses) where the different hobby shops are and where the bookstores are that cater to specific crowds who love specific slices of genre fiction. They know that the target audience—you—is likely to wander through a maze of bookshelves, pull out copies and examine the cover art, thumb through a few pages, put the book back and move on to another. Or maybe you came to the store because you already knew exactly what you wanted to buy and even called the store in advance to be sure they had a copy waiting for you on hold. But how does the book end up at the store to begin with?

Someone needs to buy it. Not you, the final customer, but a book buyer. The publisher must convince a bookstore buyer to order copies for the store. These can be huge mega-chains like Borders and B&N or local establishments that have been running for years. One of the ways the publishers do this is by giving away a free copy of the book to the buyer. Now do the math for a moment. How many bookstores are there in the US? How many worldwide? How many hundreds of copies of every book are given away each year? The buyer may not even like offering and pass on it if they feel that their customers won't want it. Of course, if a customer hears about a certain title they can ask the bookstore to special order it. But if that's not the case, a bookstore not carrying the title eliminates one of the ways where a reader can discover a book on their own (just browsing the shelves).

These advance copies are often called "galleys"—I'll have to ask what the history of that

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term means. They normally have a regular plain cover (no artwork or maps) that states the title and the author and contain the book block. But if the bookstore buyer likes it, they then order copies to be purchased when it is released. One free giveaway can literally produce hundreds of sales. Which is why publishers find it a successful marketing strategy.

This also answers the question I left open-ended in my last article. Before I left Bantam-Dell during my trip to New York, I was given several novels for free, including a galley copy of Sarah Ash's *The Lord of Snow and Shadows*. Because guess what—by mentioning her book in my articles, you might be a little more familiar with it when you see it on the bookshelf in hardcover this month.

Another strategy publishers use is getting book reviews for their offerings. This also requires sending a free copy to someone. Getting a good plug from an established author or literary magazine improves the chances that someone will hear about a book and take interest in it. Personally, I tend to follow the recommendation of friends more than Kirkus Reviews or the NY Times.

There is another marketing strategy they use that really surprised me. That is the power of an author's name—or the lack thereof. Bantam Dell is the publisher of Robin Hobb, one of their best selling authors. I've followed Robin's work closely, and she even wrote an article for the first issue of Deep Magic to support us. Except her name isn't really Robin Hobb. Her real name is Megan. I discovered that when I visited her website, but it wasn't until my trip to New York that I found out why she goes by Robin Hobb. For some reason, books sold under her real name did not do very well. The editors and marketing folks couldn't figure it out. She was a talented writer. Her work was compelling. Why wasn't the public just eating it up? So they tried a different tactic. Change the name of the author and position the book again as written by Robin Hobb. The new name would disassociate her with her other works. *Then* it started to generate some enthusiasm. *Then* it started to do better in the stores. In fact, Bantam Dell had to be careful that they didn't launch her work as a 'debut novel'—because strictly speaking it wasn't. So sometimes an author's name all alone can be a deciding factor in sales. But it was marketing that helped make the homerun possible.

The next question I had for Betsy concerned how a first-time author could promote their own work better. I thought this topic would be relevant for Deep Magic because we're starting to publish our own works and because many of our readers are writers too.

A mistake that first-time authors make—whether they are published by one of the big publishing houses or a small press—is similar to the mistake that writers make trying to get published in the first place. It seems that good old **common sense** gets unplugged again once a manuscript has made it through the end of a printing press and a box of copies arrives. The same "pesky fly" traits that annoyed editors also annoy book buyers. Being too aggressive with a bookseller can really turn them off. Realize that giving away a free copy does not guarantee that they will choose to write a review or place an order for a hundred books. For a first-time author, the new book is like a baby. Booksellers don't have time to give that baby the same love and attention they must give to the hundreds of other babies crying and whining all around them. Can you tell I have a six month old at my house right now?

So the staff at Bantam Dell offered some useful advice that is relevant regardless of who published the book. First, try to use some common sense. What annoys you as a person will probably annoy others. Second, start with a local bookseller before calling Barnes & Noble's

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national headquarters. Approach the buyer humbly and professionally—"I am the author of *Landmoor* that just came out. Can I help you in the promotion of it? I'm available to sign books or talk up your fantasy fiction titles. Let me know how I can help you." Creating a local buzz is a good thing. Talk to as many of the bookstores in the local area as possible. See if you can do readings at those bookstores or at the local libraries or schools. Those can be great fun. Doing these local events might catch the attention of the local media as well. When my children's story *The Wishing Lantern* came out, I was interviewed several times by the local newspaper and worked closely with several of the independent bookstores in the city where I lived. National exposure will come later as word of mouth swells. But do not expect it to happen right away—or at all.

Because publishing is a business that has been around for a long time, there are definite barriers to entry. Most small presses don't survive for long because it is so difficult to be heard over the roar of the hundreds of offset presses churning out mass market paperbacks. In my last article I mentioned that there are 70,000 small presses in the US alone. But if you think about the fantasy genre, there are only a few names that people tend to recognize: Del Rey, Bantam Dell, TOR, DAW, Warner Aspect. There are others. What gives these companies credibility? I asked Betsy that question.

1. Editorial quality
2. Packaging
3. National distribution

Again, these are common sense, but think about them a moment. Without a decent editing job, a first time author's work can be glaringly deformed. Nothing makes a reader cringe like a literary hangnail. What about packaging? Good covers may be a matter of opinion, but oftentimes self-published works lack a good typeset, font, or layout style. Making a book "look" professional is not as easy as you may think. Just ask Jeremy. And national distribution? The major publishing houses have personal relationships with booksellers from all over the country. They can call up Bob or Susie at Barnes and Noble and offload 20,000 copies instantly. Anne Groell, the chief editor at Bantam Dell, told me that they keep distribution lists of editors, booksellers, magazines, and sometimes they might get more than one free copy of a new release. Is that wasteful? No—that extra free copy might get handed off to someone else. A substantial component of the operational costs of the publishing business model are these free copies. Having the right connections and knowing who to send them to is what makes the big publishers big.

One of the keenest revelations that I had before leaving the 24th floor of the Random House building on Broadway and 55th related to the internet. Deep Magic is an e-zine, after all, and only available to those who can download it or manage to print a copy. I asked Betsy how the internet has changed marketing in the publishing industry. She conceded that for many people, computers are the new storefront. For me it is. Many shoppers will look up titles and read samples off of Amazon.com before buying something. Not to mention all the chat rooms and message boards and e-mail discussion groups out there which bring us friends and associates from all over the globe. But despite the hype of the internet, it is still only one method of marketing, not the end-all-be-all. She mentioned that there is yet to be a completely internet-driven book marketing campaign that has outperformed a solid market plan driven by all the five

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elements she mentioned before (who is the likely reader, where does that reader shop, etc).

To validate her words, I did a little on-line research. Using the Yahoo Financials section, I looked up the bookstore giant Barnes & Noble and compared it to Barnes&Noble.com. They are separate companies. Total revenue for the bookstore giant was $1.85 billion. Net income (that's after all the expenses and costs are deducted) is $111 million. It's a profitable operation, but not wildly so. Now look at the internet version of the bookstore. Total revenue was $106 million. The physical bookstores bring in 17x the revenues of the on-line store. And what about net income? For BN.com, they are losing money each quarter and have been (though the losses are shrinking quarter to quarter). Net income was $-3.3 million. I'm so happy I got my MBA.

I think this alone proves Betsy's point. The internet is only a facet of the publishing industry. The majority of books are still sold in traditional bookstores. Which is why you can help us be more successful. The major bookstores across the world will probably not listen to us if we ask them to carry our titles.

But they will listen to you.

And doesn't that give you a powerful feeling? It should.

As I left the Random House building that Thursday, I knew that the experience would be a turning point in my life. I walked away with some new ideas, some fantastic contacts, and many more insights into the industry I haven't shared yet.

Like what? Well, I asked Bantam Dell a question that I did not get a very satisfying answer to: Roaming a bookstore rack, how would I—a reader—know which books contained the kind of "safe places" fiction that I wanted to read? There are so many publisher labels, and in most cases, you may only glimpse the spine. They did give me an answer: "the artwork will tell you. The colors and themes. The type of scene depicted. That will tell you." But I've made the mistake more than once trusting cover art to determine if the writing was good or if there were scenes inside that would make me feel a little uncomfortable.

I left New York with an idea what to do about it. But I think I'll save that for another article.

The End

Page Turners
Deep Magic Looks at Books

One request we frequently get here in the offices of Deep Magic is for recommendations on what else to read. I mean, let's face it, even when we provide you, our faithful readers, with an issue of nearly 200 pages of quality high fantasy and science fiction, that's still not enough. We would have to produce a weekly e-zine in order to meet many of our readers' needs for quality fiction.

To help meet that need, Deep Magic is proud to present a monthly book review column in which we'll tantalize you with discussions of quality (and sometimes not-so-quality) books.

To help you make informed decisions on what to read, we've included with our reviews two handy features. First, each review will rate the book or series on a scale of one to five. In keeping with our Lamp Post Awards, we've chosen the lamp post as our rating icon. Five lamp posts means a book that every library should have. One lamp post means a book whose sole merit is it makes a good shimmy to keep your desk level. Second, in keeping with our motto of 'safe places for minds to wander,' at the end of each review, we are including a brief synopsis of areas that some might find objectionable. These two features inter-relate only insofar as too much objectionable material quite often reflects a book that is more concerned with sensationalism than with telling a good story.

So, enough of this, let's dive into the books!

Book Review: Editor's Choice

The Chronicles of Narnia
By C.S. Lewis

There are few books and series more appropriate to kick off our book review column with than C.S. Lewis' The Chronicles of Narnia. The name Deep Magic is taken from Narnia, as well as the lamp post, which we use for our annual awards and as the icon for our book ratings. Very few are the people who return from Narnia unchanged.

During the worst of the London Blitz of World War II, many children were sent from London into the English countryside for safety. The four Pevensie children — Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy — find themselves sent off to a rambling mansion owned by the eccentric Professor Kirk. One day, while playing hide-and-seek with her siblings, young Lucy hides in a wardrobe, only to discover there is no back to it. She walks through to discover a lamp post lighting the way to the land of Narnia. Thus begins the first-published of the Narnia stories, The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. In the course of the story, Lucy and her brothers and sister all make it to Narnia, where mythical creatures still live and animals talk. The Pevensies help break the curse of the evil White Witch who has been keeping Narnia in perpetual cold, "always winter, but never Christmas," and return the kingdom to Aslan the Lion, Son of the Emperor over the Sea.

In the following six books, the Pevensies return to Narnia over and again to help save it from evil. In Prince Caspian, they return to Narnia hundreds of years after their first adventure to find Narnia enslaved once again, this time under the rule of the Telmarines. The Telmarines have no room for the talking animals and other fantastic creatures of Narnia and have forced them all into the forests: out of sight, out of mind. The Pevensies once again bring Aslan back and put Caspian, friend of Narnians, on the throne. In The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, King Caspian sails from Narnia to discover the end of the world. In The Silver Chair, the Pevensies' cousin, Eustace Scrubb, and a schoolmate travel to Narnia to free Caspian's son Rilian from the enchantment of the Green Witch. The Horse and His Boy tells the story of flight of Shasta and Aravis from the oppressive world of Calormene in the south to the freedom of Narnia and Archenland in the north. The Magician's Nephew takes us back in time to the founding of Narnia, where a young Digory Kirk witnesses the creation of Narnia and sees (and unwittingly helps) evil enter it. In The Last Battle we witness the death of Narnia, as most of the Narnians deny the existence of Aslan and the world is done away with, but replaced with an even more glorious creation.

C.S. Lewis is known also for his Christian apologetical work, and his Christian background is apparent here.

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But whereas many Christian novels nowadays wear their faith on their sleeve, Narnia never succumbs to that. Instead, Lewis's belief is woven intricately into the world of Narnia so that you can't distinguish one from the other.

It is the world of Narnia, more than anything else (and there's a lot more to the books than just the secondary world), that makes these books so endearing. Lewis artfully blends the familiar with the unknown to create a world that everyone can relate to. For example, when Lucy first enters Narnia, she encounters a lamp post in the middle of the wilds, and under that lamp post is a faun. In Prince Caspian, the Telmarines enslave their own people from the cradle by sending them to repressive schools, but the children are freed by Aslan the Lion and befriended by nyads and dryads.

There is much else to encounter when one travels to Narnia: giants, marshwiggles, the parliament of owls, dwarves, dragons, Dufflepuds, stars that have retired to earth, talking animals. But these are not just children's books. Lewis believed firmly that any book worth reading at 10 should also be worth reading at 60, and in Narnia he proves that point.

Possible objectionable material: If you're a teacher from Telmar, teaching Narnians, these books are too much fun. Other than that, nothing at all objectionable.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Book Review: Fantasy

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

By J.K. Rowling

If you're one of the four people on the planet who has not already purchased and read Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, the fifth book in the Hogwarts series, then this review is for you. I'm not a die-hard Harry Potter fan: I didn't get the book at a midnight pajama party at my local bookstore—I showed much patience and waited until the next morning before rushing out and buying it. But I've still enjoyed the series from the first book, and with this fifth installment, there's only one thing to say:

Wow.

I was among those who were not very pleased with book four, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire. It was big and cumbersome and could have been trimmed by at least 100 pages and still not be considered thin. But the story was engaging, and so I excitedly awaited installment five.

It's here now (as we all know), and I can confidently declare that a lot of the promise that the Hogwarts series revealed early on is now finally being realized.

At the end of the fourth book, the evil Lord Voldemort has finally returned in bodily form, but the Ministry of Magic doesn't believe he's actually back, since only Harry has seen him. Wishing instead to keep the wizard world peaceful, the Ministry of Magic begins a campaign to quiet and silence those who insist that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back, foremost among them Harry and Hogwarts headmaster, Albus Dumbledore.

Like the other books in the series, Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix follows Harry and his friends through a year at Hogwarts. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville are now in their fifth year and facing their O.W.L.s (Ordinary Wizardry Levels), similar to the British school system's o-level exams. But amidst the stress of preparing for some of the most important exams they'll ever take, the Hogwarts students must fight against a government intent on denying and squelching any mention of Voldemort's return.

The end of the fourth book promised a turning toward a more sinister plot. Innocence was definitely gone with the death of a Hogwarts student at the hands of Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Book five makes good on that as we see the Hogwarts cast preparing in different ways for the Second War against Voldemort. War, however, is never pleasant and so as the staff and students prepare for what is to come, we witness them facing difficult decisions.

One of the aspects of the first four books that I found problematic is Harry's disrespect for authority. It felt as if Harry were acting in an amoral universe where the only difference between the heroes and the villains was that the villains sneered. (Count the number of times in the fourth volume that Harry lies—it's a staggering number.) But in the fifth volume, Harry begins to be called to account for his actions. It is almost as if the first three books were laying out a lot of the background, book four was transition, and now we have the development of Harry's character beginning in book five. That, more than anything, left me breathless by book's end, hoping—begging—that it would not be another three years until the next volume.

Possible objectionable material: none. However, those

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who objected to the first four books for moral reasons will likely find this book cut from the same cloth.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Book Review: Classic Science Fiction
The Space Trilogy
By C.S. Lewis

A long time ago, the legend has it, in a pub not too far away (in Oxford, to be exact), two college dons were lamenting that there weren't enough of the types of books that they liked to read, and so they set out to remedy the situation. One of them chose to write about time travel, and the other chose to write about space travel. Of the former, we have left to us only fragments, published not too long ago in The Lost Road by J.R.R. Tolkien. The space travel story, however, was published. After the first story came two more novels set in the same world, and that trilogy has come to be considered a classic of the genre.

C.S. Lewis's Space Trilogy begins with Out of the Silent Planet in which linguist Elwin Ransom is kidnapped by mad Professor Weston and taken to Mars. Ransom manages to escape and while on the run, discovers the majestic cosmology to which Earth has become numb: the universe is ruled by Maleldil and by his angelic creatures, eldila. Over each planet is an Oyarsa, a kind of super-eldil. Earth, however, rebelled long ago, and was cut off from the music of the heavens, losing its benevolent Oyarsa, becoming the silent planet of the title. Ransom learns all this and then manages to return to Earth.

In Perelandra, the second book, Ransom travels to Venus (the Perelandra of the title) where Weston has also gone in an attempt to bring about in Perelandra a fall into silence similar to Earth's. Ransom's job is to prevent that from happening. Ransom meets up with the Green Lady, Perelandra's Eve, who is searching for her Adam, and who is already being tempted by Weston.

The third book, That Hideous Strength, moves the action of the story back to Thulcandra, the Silent Planet. Ransom has become permanently injured from his time on Perelandra and so must use agents to effect his will. Merlin has reawakened to combat a resurgence of evil in Britain. The N.I.C.E. (National Institute of Co-ordinated Experiments) is a scientific think-tank that is attempting to dominate the world through mind control. Ransom, now the Fisher King, and his team (the Fellowship of St. Anne, which includes some of Ransom's servants, a young couple who are on the edge of being ensnared by N.I.C.E., and Mr. Bultitude the Bear) attempt to rid the world of this evil.

This is not your ordinary sci-fi. There are many, actually, who would classify this trilogy science fantasy because it is based more on a science of ethics than on the science of the scientific method. But that's OK, because since it comes from a mind as great as C.S. Lewis's, you can expect not only a ripping yarn, but also a well-thought out story.

These are books of ideas where argument is as important as adventure, but nowhere does argument overwhelm the plot. In Out of the Silent Planet, we flee with Ransom across the bizarre and alien landscape of Mars; in Perelandra we get front-row seats when Ransom and Weston get in an extended duel with the fate of a planet hanging in the balance; and in That Hideous Strength we read with bated breath as one horror of science taken to its extreme after another is unfolded. For Lewis, story always came first, and in sci-fi, there aren't many stories better than these.

Possible objectionable material: none.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Book Review: Science Fiction
The Longest Way Home
By Robert Silverberg

Five-time Hugo and five-time Nebula Award winning author Robert Silverberg's most popular work includes the epic Majipoor Cycle series. But for one of his most recent books, *The Longest Way Home*, Silverberg transports us to a new planet, Homeworld. Here, young Joseph Master Keilloran must journey six-thousand miles to reach his home, more than a continent away.

Homeworld has been occupied by humans for thousands of years; first by the Folk, and then by the Masters. The Masters had been ruling for hundreds of years when the seemingly peaceful Folk rebelled.

Joseph awakens to the sounds of explosions. Geften

continued on next page

House is in flames; the family and most of the servants have been slaughtered. A faithful family servant of the Folk (serving class) escorts him from the house in safety. Relay stations have been blown up, and Joseph is unable to use his Combinant to contact his family. Alone and surrounded by enemies, Joseph sets off towards a village of Indigenes (a native species of intelligent life.) He desperately hopes they will help him despite their total indifference to human concerns.

I enjoyed traversing the vast continent of Manza with Joseph as he discovers firsthand the lifestyles, philosophies and religious beliefs of its many inhabitants. The plot is engaging and the characters realistic. Silverberg insightfully depicts the way Joseph's experiences impact both his beliefs and his behavior. I couldn't wait to discover what Joseph would find when he finally reached his destination.

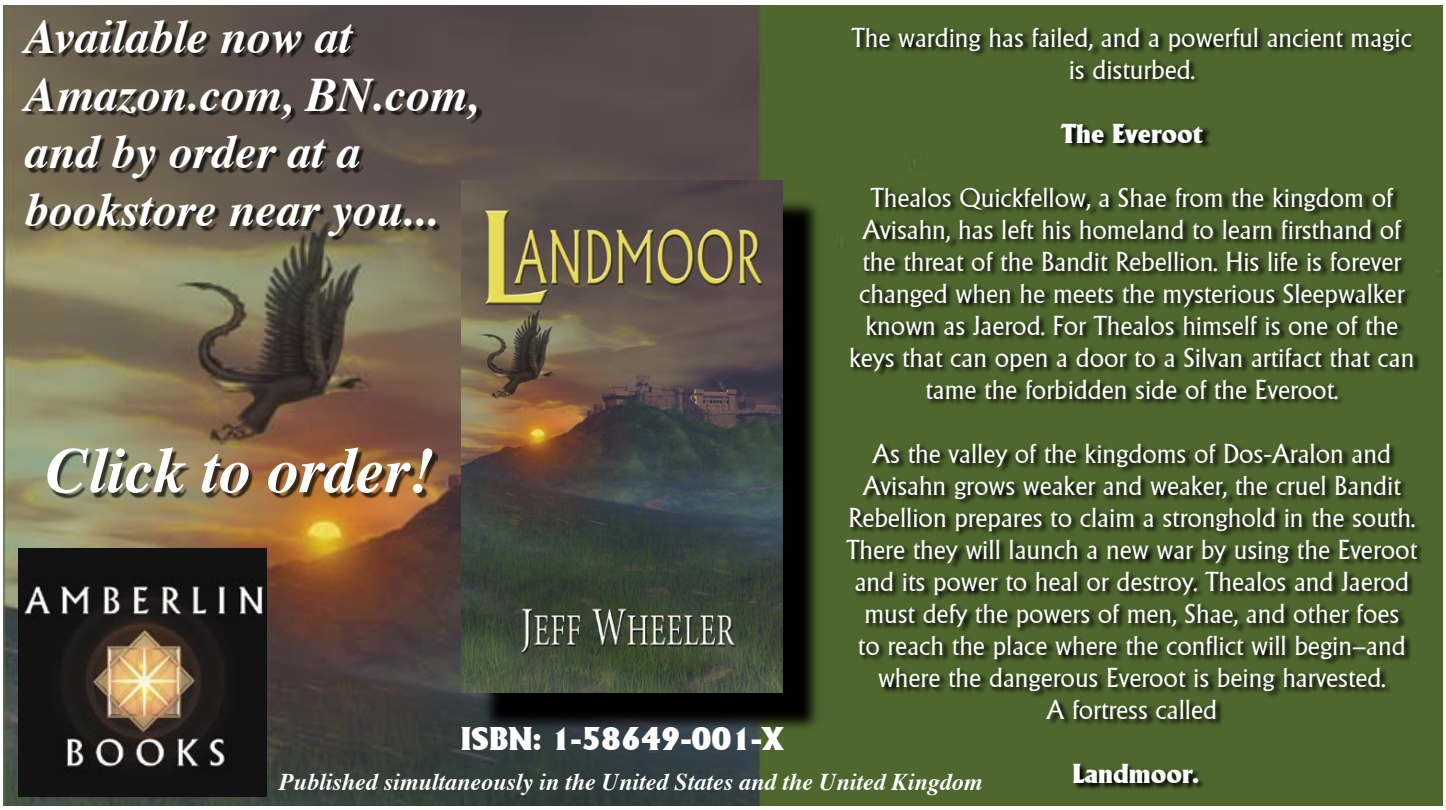
One criticism I have is that sometimes Joseph's behavior seemed inconsistent with his character. I couldn't decide if this was a deliberate depiction of adolescence by Silverberg or a flaw in the book.

I also didn't like Joseph consistently finding himself in situations where he needed help, and then help arriving just in time. It seemed a little unbelievable.

Yet, all in all, the book was a pretty good read.

Possible objectionable material: A fairly graphic intimate scene, which is reflected upon several times later in the book.

(Reviewed by Rochelle Buck)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LANDMOOR
JEFF WHEELER
AMBERLIN BOOKS
ISBN: 1-58649-001-X
Published simultaneously in the United States and the United Kingdom
The warding has failed, and a powerful ancient magic is disturbed.
The Everoot
Thealos Quickfellow, a Shae from the kingdom of Avisahn, has left his homeland to learn firsthand of the threat of the Bandit Rebellion. His life is forever changed when he meets the mysterious Sleepwalker known as Jaerod. For Thealos himself is one of the keys that can open a door to a Silvan artifact that can tame the forbidden side of the Everoot.
As the valley of the kingdoms of Dos-Aralon and Avisahn grows weaker and weaker, the cruel Bandit Rebellion prepares to claim a stronghold in the south. There they will launch a new war by using the Everoot and its power to heal or destroy. Thealos and Jaerod must defy the powers of men, Shae, and other foes to reach the place where the conflict will begin–and where the dangerous Everoot is being harvested.
A fortress called
Landmoor.

Spells End

By Mark C. Ford

Only the desperate ended up in Spells End. Good or evil, strong or weak, sane or insane, it didn't matter. They came there for the last shreds of dying magic. The town sat in the middle of a ring of mountains and a two-week stretch of barren black sands, leaving little other reason. The first thing they learned in Spells End was that desperation came in degrees.

My desperation lived on my back and bent me lower to the world every day. I didn't come here to join the search for an answer. Neither did I have less noble aspirations of bilking the rising panic, like the merchants who now sold parchment for nearly two weeks' salary. I certainly harbored no desire to live in wanton decadence in the bowels of some spell den until the last drop dried up. I wanted to undo what I had done.

"Hey Mister, want water? I know who got it," an urchin called out as he grabbed my elbow and tugged, snapping me out of my thoughts. "Fifty crowns. Ya got that, don't ya?"

Darkspell, disease spinner, death caster; I had many names. All of them got the kind of attention I didn't need.

With the voice came the rush of the market. The smell of burning dirt lizard, drying flat bread and baked cactus fought for my attention with the dry sounds of hawkers, prostitutes, and buyers. Dry, always dry. Everything dry. I shook off the boy's hand.

"You should be careful who you touch, even here," I told the urchin, letting him see the black in my eyes and the blood red pupils. He backed away quickly, tripping over a cart of spell trinkets and fetching anger from the vendor. I hid my face again and walked away, the boy already forgotten. Other things filled my mind.

Things like Clarissa—trusting Clarissa. And why shouldn't she have been? I gave and I took away. It had always been that way. How could she know that things would fail just between the two?

I stopped at the fetish vendor and bought what little I needed. My head stayed down, my eyes hidden. Darkspell, disease spinner, death caster; I had many names. All of them got the kind of attention I didn't need. Once I would have relished driving fear into the people. Now I dreamed only of driving fear out of one.

I walked in silence from the market, across the industry district, to the hastily made shanties of Hex Town. How easily I could get lost in the rows of same on same poverty - one shanty looked so much like the next - if the image of placing her in such a putrid squalor had not burned the way into me. Fifth row, third shanty from the sunset side. I made my way there unchallenged.

I pushed open the door, careful not to break it from the hinges.

"Carlos?" she asked, her voice so brave, but so weak. She could no longer see.

"Yes," I said, and pulled the water skin from my side to bend down and drip some on her lips. She licked at the moisture, careful, never greedy.

"Thank you. Did you find what you needed?" she asked.

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Artist Profile
Allen Douglas

Website: http://www.allendouglasstudio.com/
Lord of the Nazgul (top)
The Ruins of Tarek Nev (bottom left)
Akrasia, Thief of Time (bottom right)

The Geek's Guide to Grammar
Punctuating Dialogue

If there's anything all stories have, it's dialogue. And believe me, if you want to be a writer, you need to know how to do it properly. So here is the quick and dirty way of punctuating dialogue in your stories.

Rule: Standard Fiction dialogue should have all punctuation within quotation marks.
Rule: Dialogue tags are part of the same sentence and are usually set off with commas.

To start, just about all punctuation in fiction dialogue will fall within quotation marks. `"Stop waving that sword in my face!"` and `"I never wanted to be King."` That's the easy part. We commonly see mistakes slip in when sentences contain dialogue tags (he said/she said). In such a case, periods are changed to commas; exclamation points and question marks stay the same, but they are treated as commas for the sake of punctuating the sentence as a whole. `"I never wanted to be King," he said.` and `"Stop waving that sword in my face!" she screamed.` The dialogue tag (he said/she screamed) is lowercase and ends in a period, unless the dialogue continues in the same sentence. Then the period once again becomes a comma. `"I never wanted to be King," he said, "but I guess I'm stuck with the job."` The continuation of the dialogue is lowercase. If, however, the continuing dialogue starts a new sentence, then it should be preceded by a period and capitalized. `"I never wanted to be King," he said. "I wanted to be a Lion Tamer."`

So what happens if the dialogue tag comes first? Well, much as you would suspect. `The King whispered, "I never wanted this job."` Again, the period (or other punctuation) should fall within the quotation marks at the end of the spoken part of the sentence. Also, because the quoted part of the sentence starts an independent sentence, it should be capitalized. If the dialogue tag isn't a "he said" tag, but rather describes a non-speaking related action, it should end in a period, not a comma, and the dialogue should be capitalized. `The King looked down at the floor. "I never wanted this job."` but `The King looked down at the floor and whispered, "I never wanted this job."`

How about more than one paragraph of speech by the same person? Standards hold that the first paragraph doesn't end in quotes, but the next paragraph should begin in quotes. The final paragraph of speech by the speaker would end in quotes. However, The Geek holds that, while this rule is fine, it is best only used with more than three or four decently-sized paragraphs. If the section in question only has two or three short paragraphs, it is best to end each one with quotation marks.

It should be noted as a reminder that, once inside quotation marks, sentences follow all the normal rules of grammar. More rules of dialogue punctuation come in with more complex situations, most of which are rare in fictional writing. For example: quoted dialogue within dialogue. That alone will require an addition article. Stay tuned for future installments of The Geek's Guide to Grammar for more on punctuating dialogue and other rules of grammar.

Ask the Geek

Do you have a grammar question for The Geek? This is the place to ask. Simply send an email, and he'll respond. Be prepared, because your question may be printed in a future issue. EMAIL THE GEEK

Common mistake:

A dialogue tag should not contain non-speaking related actions. One common dialogue tag that should never be used is: he laughed or she giggled. You can't laugh a line of speech. You can say a line, scream it, whisper it, murmur it. But you can't laugh it. You can however, say it with a laugh. `"Stop doing that," she said with a laugh.`

THE RISE
By Sarah Dobbs

Prologue

Markooth was not moving. Only his eyes were alive, but just barely. His lips were a garish, unnatural red from the blood the drop had caused to sputter up. Rain diluted it, washed it away as though cleansing him of his sins.

Steeling her squeamishness, Ry-anne forced herself to finish off what she had set out to do. With trembling hands, she blinked through the downpour and leaned forward. Her hands were poised in a claw-like position, ready but reluctant to pounce. She noticed that they were scarred and bloodied with thousands of tiny cuts. But she looked beyond her own hands and towards Markooth's vulnerable neck.

And then she saw it.

"No," she whispered.

She reached out, not daring to breathe, and touched the small image. Cold dread gripped her claustrophobically. No longer could she feel the drumming of the rain hammering at her freezing skull. No longer could she feel the raging of the wind tearing at her drenched, limp hair. All she could feel was overwhelming grief.

"Tell me what this means?" she implored.

No longer could she feel the drumming of the rain hammering at her freezing skull. No longer could she feel the raging of the wind tearing at her drenched, limp hair. All she could feel was overwhelming grief.

PART ONE
ONE

Ry-anne bounded up on her bed. Today was the day! She shoved up the stiff lever at the window and the wooden slats opened. A sunbeam smiled in. It was a bright dawn with few clouds, and although it was yet chill outside, Ry-anne could tell that it would be a hot morn. Thank the Grand it was not raining like Pappy Johann said it had been on Gwynnie's day. Ry-anne's small feet thudded across the wooden floor of her room, darting through the shafts of sunlight. She dragged on her eve robe and twisted the door handle.

In the East Wing corridor, not much stirred. At such an hour—when the bells had not even sounded—most of the House would probably still be asleep, except the village-hired servants and, of course, the Priestess and a certain someone other. Ry-anne suppressed an excited squeal

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"If ever you or your children get in trouble, whether it be physically, mentally, or otherwise, remove the pearl lid and I will appear," she told Clarabella, days before her death. "Be careful in your selection of use. I can only perform this magical favor once," she warned.

If only Clarabella had taken the bottle into town that fateful day, both she and Troy's father may have survived the wounds of the thief's blade. It was too late for them, Troy thought as he walked down the steps to the basement of the castle. Lying in the remote, darkest corner of the basement, the bottle sat still intact. Troy had never dreamed a day would come when his fate would lie in the hands of anyone but himself. So the bottle had sat for many years collecting dust, never seeing the light of day. Troy could only hope it would still serve its intended purpose. He looked around the musty basement. He was all alone in the castle. The servants, upon hearing the news of his financial demise, had retreated to castles of wealthier and more economically-minded lords.

Troy took the bottle in his hand. Its texture was moist and stark, a mild protest to Troy's obvious neglect. He removed the emerald lid from the bottle. A foul, gray-colored smoke poisoned the air. The flame of the candles was extinguished. The basement was overtaken with darkness. A coldness surrounded Troy.

"Yessss..." a scratchy, high-toned voice said in the dark.

"I need to be rich again," Troy announced, not wasting any time.

An icy hand cut through the murky basement, taking hold of Troy's arm.

"You are rich, my boy. You are alive."

"That's not enough, you hag," Troy said, his temper rearing its ugly head.

"You are a fool, son."

"You promised my mother a wish for her or her children. Does your word mean nothing?"

"You are nothing like your mother. It is painfully obvious you have inherited the traits of your father."

"Thank you," Troy said sarcastically.

"Very well then, my boy, but I don't want to make it too easy on you. All the riches you desire await you. But you will have to search for them. Any contest you enter, or are entered in, you will win. No matter what the field, no matter what the prize, you will win."

Troy didn't take to the concept of the granting of his wish. He opened his mouth to protest. The flame of the candles resurfaced. Light was restored. The bottle was gone, as was the witch. Troy headed up the steps to get some rest.

* * *

The next morning, after a couple hours of rest, Troy awoke feeling anew. He dressed in his finest attire, mounted the horse, and rode out into the land of Athenia. There were small contests here and there. There was a bow shooting contest which paid a modest amount of coins. A writing contest for scholars and the like. Even a sword-fighting contest that promised the winner a small sack of gold, as well as the respect of the townspeople. The first item mildly tickled Troy's interest, the latter not so much. And so he entered and won them all, much to the disbelief of the Athenians.

"I never knew Troy was such a marksman," one elder commented.

"And a scholar, who can handle a sword." the other remarked.

The women of Athenia dreamed of being Troy's wife. "He's so handsome," one pale, large-bosomed maiden cried out.

"And there's nothing he can't do," another commented.

Athenia felt both admiration and envy for young Troy. But the coins were not enough to sustain the means in which Troy wanted to live. And so he set out to explore other lands and conquests. He traveled to Othellan, Milam and even the rival town of Concordia. In each one he dazzled and delighted the crowds with his wide array of newfound expertise. The women stared at him with lustful eyes. He had his pick, and when the notion struck him, he escorted one back to his temporary chambers. This all contented him somewhat, and the riches were finally starting to accumulate. It was in Concordia though, that something, or rather someone, struck his fancy.

Her name was Gabrielle. Her hair was the color of sunshine. Her eyes a distant, clear ocean. Her frame was petite. Her lips like a rose. When she spoke, it sounded to Troy like someone strumming a harp. Gabrielle, in all regards, was the most beautiful thing Troy had ever seen. As was often the case with Troy, whatever or whoever he longed for, he sought after. Gabrielle was different from the other women. Troy's handsome looks and his seemingly endless talents did not charm her. She found him to be perfidious and somewhat contrite. After several unsuccessful approaches, Troy felt he would lose his mind.

It seemed Gabrielle's heart belonged to another. The man's name was Teron. Teron was much the opposite of Troy in that he was kind, sincere, and genuinely not as concerned with his own welfare as much as the welfare of others. Troy had an idea. He approached Teron.

"Teron, I hear you are quite the bow shooter."

"I'm fair," Teron answered modestly.

"I've heard better than fair," Troy countered. "I've heard best in the land."

Teron smiled and offered his hand. "Thank you."

Troy pushed Teron's hand away. "I only tell you what I hear, not what I believe. I size you up as a coward."

These words contested Teron's good will. But it persisted. "That is your right, good sir."

Troy's face reddened. The vein above his right eye displayed itself. "I also believe you come from a long line of cowards. You are meek, like those before you. Constantly showing restraint. You don't deserve to be called a man. You don't deserve to hold Gabrielle by your side. Your family are pigs, unworthy of even my words."

Teron's temple pulsated. His limbs trembled. Never had his heart known such anger. "What is it you want of me?" Teron screamed out.

"I have a simple challenge," Troy said. "A duel of sorts. If I out-shoot you, I get Gabrielle's hand."

"And if I out-shoot you?" Teron asked.

"You get my life," Troy answered.

Blood flowed sprightly through Teron's veins. Nothing would please him more. In a moment of haste, and with the knowledge that he was the best shot in the land, Teron again stuck out his hand. "Done."

Troy took his hand, squeezing it tight. A smile surfaced on his face. "Tomorrow at daylight. Concordia field," he said, and walked away.

* * *

At daylight the next morning, Concordia field was full of spectators. Word had gotten around. Gabrielle sat nervously by Teron's side. Though she worried, her trust in Teron was strong. Troy caught her eye and shot a playful wink in her direction. His confidence, with so much on the line, astonished her. Teron and Troy stood side by side, their targets equally close. They stared into the other's eyes, searching for weakness, and found none. At fifty yards the red bull's-eye was nothing more than a small dot. But to shooters like Teron and Troy, they were but an eyelash away. The crowd fidgeted in anticipation. The judges took their places.

The competition began. Teron started it off with a bull's-eye, as dead-center as possible. Troy matched it, and so it went on. For nearly an hour, nothing but bull's-eyes. No one had ever seen such marksmanship. Teron began to get nervous. As Troy expected, magic did prevail. On his twentieth shot, Teron let his left arm drop a hair. It was just enough to cause the arrow to land an inch below the intended target. Gabrielle's heart dropped. The judges declared Troy the winner. Teron fell to his knees, begging Troy not take Gabrielle. Troy spat down at him, ran over to his horse and jumped on. He raced towards Gabrielle and snatched her up onto the horse in stride.

"Look back at Teron," Troy commanded. "It is the last time you will ever see him."

They galloped away past the angry mob of screaming people of Concordia and towards Athenia.

* * *

Many years passed. At first, Gabrielle would have nothing to do with Troy. She would not cook for him. She would only clean after herself. They slept in separate beds. Then one night after a heated argument, Troy dropped to his knees before Gabrielle.

"Why can't you love me? All I want and desire is for you to love me. I would give anything."

Gabrielle stared into his eyes. His sincerity astonished her. Her heart opened up. At that very moment she fell in love with Troy. A few months later she was pregnant.

As Troy and Gabrielle were busy with their lives together, a great and powerful king had risen into power in Athenia. He promised Athenians great things. But once in power, he had behaved more like a tyrant than a king. He used his crown to do many unnatural things. It was rumored that he was a disciple of witchcraft. It was even known to his servants, who passed along the gossip, that behind closed doors he talked to a witch that no one could see but him. All of Athenia feared him. They did not dare question his authority. He promised to build an army with weapons so advanced, no one would dare wage war on them. This king's name was Teron.

Teron sent for Troy one day. Two armed men came to Troy's castle.

"The king has requested your presence at his quarters, Troy," one of the men said.

"What does he want of me?" Troy asked fearfully.

"We do not know. Come with us."

Troy kissed Gabrielle's forehead. Tears peeked from the corners of her eyes. He could not stand the sight of it, and he turned and left with the men.

"Welcome, Troy," Teron sarcastically announced to his guest.

"What do you want from me?" Troy demanded.

"Nothing much, Troy. I wanted to familiarize you with my plans for your great land. I have big plans, big plans indeed."

"Your plans don't interest me, Teron."

"Ahh.... but they should, my friend. You see, I have never been the same since you took my dearest Gabrielle from me. But you taught me a lesson on that day. I see things much the way you see them, Troy. We are alike now. But I am sure this is not good news for you."

"You do not scare me," Troy boasted.

"Well, we shall see. I have developed a weapon so powerful that it will surely take Athenia to new heights and establish us as a power to be reckoned with. The problem is, this weapon is untested. I have planned a public display so that all of Athenia can witness its power, as well as the power of its king. I thought of using you as my guinea pig, Troy. But that would be unfair. I want to be known as a fair king, and so I have decided to hold a lottery. A death lottery. All the names of the men of the town shall be placed in a barrel. I will draw one name. That unlucky soul shall be my guinea pig. A small price to pay for supremacy."

Troy shook uncontrollably. He turned to run, but the guards seized him.

"Why Troy, what do you run for? What are the chances of all the men of Athenia, that your name will be chosen? Do not fear." Teron beamed. Somewhere in the castle an elder, sinister laugh erupted. Teron joined in the laughter. Troy did not even notice, his thoughts instead focused on Gabrielle and his unborn child he would never meet.

The End

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think I can swipe Mackie's password without him looking."

Alyssa sighed. "This is our last day together as the Urban Prophets. Can you two try wrapping it up without an argument?"

Carl looked ornery, but kept his silence for a moment as he leaned back and surveyed the half-circle top of Mackie's cluttered desk. The neon glow of the computer screen (which faced towards the back wall) cast a bluish sheen over various stacks of data cards, computer parts, and discarded candy wrappers.

"Psst! Alyssa! Let me borrow your PDA."

"No," replied Alyssa tersely. "I'm trying to take notes."

"This'll only take a second. Besides, we already know all this stuff. Mackie's just reading from the bulletin board."

"Fine."

She handed over her PDA. Carl took it and winked at Vanessa, whose expression read: Show, don't tell. He went to work, attaching his wristband to the PDA and calling up the appropriate program.

As much as Alyssa disliked foolish behavior when it wasn't appropriate, she had to admit it was sort of fun watching Carl revel in his own affinity for all things electronic. In particular, he enjoyed tinkering with gadgets that could be "tweaked" with relative ease. A hyper yoyo, which was really just a metallic sphere tuned to a magnetic field produced by the corresponding wristband, was the perfect example. Most kids had one or two, but Carl was probably the only kid on his block who'd installed a miniature video camera into his. Plug the wristband into a computer (in this case, Alyssa's PDA) and presto—instant spycam. What was supposed to be an amusing toy had now become a nifty tool for the resourceful and prurient alike.

"Watch and learn," he whispered as he flicked his wrist slightly. The yoyo bounced up into the air and hovered obediently a few inches from his face. He blinked, keeping his eyes focused on Alyssa's PDA screen and delicately guiding the yoyo along the fringes of the assembly. Every so often, he would accidentally jerk his wrist a little too quickly, causing the magnetic field to purr as the yoyo realigned itself. However, if anyone noticed they didn't make a motion to alert Mackie, who continued talking, unaffected. Licking his lips, Carl leaned forward slightly, edging the yoyo along the floor, past the vending machine, up along the neon lighting of the rear wall. Mackie's terminal was almost in view when Vanessa quite abruptly jostled his knee with her own, disrupting his concentration and sending the yoyo out of control. It buzzed unceremoniously and fluttered around in the air above Mackie, who (without missing a beat) jumped up and grabbed it in his hand.

"Well," he said, looking immediately at Carl. "It looks like the Urban Prophets are just dying to move on to other things." Several people turned to face the children. Carl's face was beet-red.

Mackie continued. "While I scold the little talking fetuses here, the rest of you go ahead and get back to whatever it was you were doing. Don't forget to lock in your assignments before you leave tonight, and remember that the money jar's always open for donations. Peace out."

The crowd dissipated, most people returning to their terminals, some heading for the vending machine or restroom. Carl, Alyssa, and Vanessa slowly got to their feet as Mackie approached them. At twenty-seven, he was still young enough to be able to relate to the majority of his clientele—yet he carried with him a sense of adulthood, an air of respect and responsibility.

Not to mention the fact that, despite an affinity for sweets, he was pretty well-built and could physically take care of business, if necessary.

"This isn't a playpen," he said, "and I'm not your babysitter. You guys know that."

Carl, prompted by a nudge in the ribs from Vanessa, flashed a boyish grin and replied, "Sorry, Mackie. It won't happen again."

"Yeah, that's right...because if it does, I'll start expelling you tots left and right. Understood?"

The children nodded.

His authority reinforced, Mackie held up Carl's yoyo and examined it with an amused smile. "Nice work, by the way. You can hardly tell there's a camera inside."

"God only knows what he uses it for," said Alyssa, rolling her eyes. She tended to be wary of technology when paired with the mind of a twelve-year-old boy.

Mackie chuckled, shaking his head and handing the yoyo back to Carl. "Just be glad you didn't break anything. I meant what I said about not fooling around in here. It's hard enough getting people to take the only metaphysics-related DHC hub in Santa Clarita seriously without having a couple punk airbladers running amok." He shoved his hands into the pockets of his board shorts. "So...I hear you guys have some major insight into the fireflies thing?"

Alyssa nodded, glad for the change of subject. "Hopefully. There's supposed to be a major swarm tonight around midnight."

Mackie laughed, gesturing for the children to follow him to his desk. "And you came by this information via the Weather Channel?"

"No...we've been talking to someone, um, in the know."

"Ah. And this someone in the know told you he can predict a swarm despite the fact that to date no one has ever been able to do such a thing?"

"It's a she," Alyssa answered, setting herself on a stool. "She's seen many swarms before, just like many people probably have. The reported cases are a minority when compared to the number of sightings that are simply written off as flukes or coincidences. Most people think they are seeing something that has already been documented by the scientific community, so they don't bother to take out their cameras or notepads."

Mackie scowled playfully. "Are you sure you're not, like, thirty-five years old?"

Vanessa snickered. "She likes to use a lot of those big words. Basically, we've been talking to a lot of different people who all say they've seen firefly swarms. Some see them more often than others...we found someone who swears she can make out a cycle to their appearances."

"It's like predicting the weather," Carl added with an assured nod. He was still toying with his yoyo, albeit this time he was sure to keep it within arm's reach.

Mackie disagreed. "You can't just track these things. They don't show up on any kind of equipment until they're...there. Maybe you're looking out across a field and all of the sudden the air lights up with a bunch of the little buggers. It could be fifty feet away, it could be a hundred and fifty. It's like trying to predict where a raindrop will fall during a thunderstorm. You don't know until it happens, and by then it's too late to capture any good footage of the raindrop actually falling."

"Maybe, maybe not," said Alyssa with a secretive smile. "It's hard to track ghosts, they don't show up easily either—but there are people who just know when and where one will make an appearance. In any case, you'll just have to wait and see, won't you?"

For a moment Mackie looked as if he might debate the issue further, but there was club work to be done, databases to be updated, terminals to be maintained. As such, he merely smiled, and offered his hand to Alyssa. "Alyssa, my girl, I do believe you've learned to blow smoke. We call that sensationalism in the danger hunting biz."

"Right."

The children looked each other, sharing a smile. They left the desk then, Mackie calling after them: "Good luck tonight, and good luck in L.A., Carl. Hope you'll keep in touch."

He didn't see Alyssa twitch slightly at the reminder of Carl's impending absence.

* * *

The Neomancers were sharing a smoke at the edge of the Goblin's Club parking lot when Alyssa and her companions exited the cafe. Gary Barnett, the Neomancers' leader, snickered deviously.

"Hey, Little Hanson!" he called out, gesturing for his companions to follow him. They quickly crossed the lot and surrounded the children, who'd been strapping on their airblades for the trip home. "I couldn't help but overhear your girls talking to Mackie about a one-up on the swarms tonight?"

Carl finished strapping on his blades before standing at his full height, and folding his arms defiantly. "They're not my girls. They're my partners."

"Whatever you call it, Hanson," said Gary. He was sixteen, and a good head taller than Carl. He reached out, and ruffled Carl's hair as he would a child's. "Whatever gets you the action, right?"

Alyssa scowled, muttering under her breath: "What a pig."

"What do you want, Gary?" Carl grumbled, not giving the older boy a chance to respond to Alyssa's observation.

Even in the fading crimson light of the early evening, Gary's eyes seemed to flare. He glanced briefly at Alyssa as he said to Carl, "How about a cease-fire? A pact? We both want the same thing, and that's to get some really good documentation on the fireflies. Both our clubs can work together. I got a car. You guys can ride with us wherever you need to go, and in exchange we get to share whatever footage comes up tonight. Fifty-fifty, teamwork all the way. That's what it's all about, right?"

Carl snorted. "Not when half the team is only interested in upping their own stats, while letting the other half do most of the work."

Gary's expression darkened. "You'd better watch it, Hanson. You're playing with the big boys now. Know how to mind your elders."

"You're only sixteen," Vanessa pointed out.

"And you're just a bunch of little underage kiddies with an honorary Goblin's Club membership, registered under Mackie's name. You get the credit now for that Dead Whistler freak, but you'd better be careful. One day you might rub Mackie the wrong way, and he might not be so friendly anymore—and you'll suddenly find that he's taken credit for all your assignments."

"Gary," said Carl quietly. "Do us all a favor and get bent."

Nobody said anything. Alyssa and Vanessa watched nervously as Carl, clenching and

unclenching his fists, stared Gary down. True, he was tall for twelve, and quite athletic—but Gary was taller, on the Canyon High School competitive wrestling team, and had a well-known reputation for using his fists whenever it suited him. He would have the advantage in a fight, Carl had to know that.

"Carl, let's go," Alyssa whispered, linking her arm in his.

Carl bit his lip, holding his stance for a moment longer before hefting his backpack and making his way out of the Neomancers' circle. One of the older youths moved out of the way slightly, much to Gary's chagrin.

"Screw it," he said, and the Neomancers dissipated.

Both clubs went their separate ways.

* * *

The Urban Prophets made their way northward along Whites Canyon Road. It was a slow ascent (past numerous apartment complexes, gated communities and corner hydrogen stations), leading them into the foothills, where their respective parents' homes lay: a patchwork of single-story, southern California houses that had, for the most part, been built in the late twentieth century.

They cut through Canyon High School's football field, where the year-rounders were having practice, and ended up on the steps behind North Oaks Park for a brief rest stop.

"Okay, game plans, everyone," said Carl as he sipped from his water bottle, his sweaty face bathed in the acrid light of the nearby street lamps. "We have to be at the trailer park by eleven thirty, so I should probably pick you girls up by eleven the latest."

"I'll be ready," said Vanessa. "Message me and I'll meet you in the alley like we usually do. Just don't wake up the next door neighbors' dog or we're screwed."

Carl almost spit water all over the sidewalk. "That wasn't my fault," he exclaimed with mock insult. "I'm not the one who forgot blades don't work on water or in small swimming pools."

"Still, Rupert didn't start wailing until you came stumbling over the fence."

Shaking his head and facing Alyssa, Carl suddenly became aware of her sullen demeanor. "Why so quiet, Aly?"

She replied, without looking up, "You're leaving tomorrow."

"Aw." Carl set down his drink and skated beside her. "It won't be so bad. We'll call each other all the time, I can come down on weekends...we'll make every Sunday better than the last, okay?"

"I know, but..." Alyssa trailed off, unable to help herself as she started sobbing softly. I hate this, she thought. We've had such a great summer together...it went too fast. Everything's changing too fast.

Carl sat beside her, took her in his arms, and dealt with the situation in the only way he knew how: by talking about anything and everything that came to his mind, even if it had absolutely no relevance to what was going on at the moment. Talking and cuddling, waiting it out.

"You know, at my mom's work she has this section leader who's lactose intolerant, and so they had this party one day for someone's birthday. In the middle of it they gave this guy some vanilla ice cream, saying it was made from rice milk—just to see what would happen if he ate

it—and about ten minutes later this God-awful smell fills the room, nobody knows where it's coming from, and then they look over and see this guy all red-faced, just sitting at his desk and looking like he just took a dump in his pants...my new school looks pretty cool. I've seen the gym there, and I met my new swim coaches. They're pretty cool too. The team made the state championships last year and they want to do it again this year, so maybe if I work real hard I won't screw it up for them..."

Alyssa eventually found herself smiling again, apologizing for her foolishness and wiping her tear-streaked face with the sleeve of her sweatshirt.

"No worries," Carl said, paying Vanessa a brief, somewhat embarrassed glance. "What?"

"You guys aren't going to kiss?"

He flushed bright red and separated himself from Alyssa, who suddenly feigned interest in the straps of her airblades.

Vanessa groaned, getting to her feet. "Go on, don't mind me. Really. If you two want to have one last make-out fest, I'll just go over here..."

"Ness..." began Alyssa with a sigh.

"Come on! He's such a good kisser! Remember that time out behind the school, when I grabbed his butt—"

"I didn't want to kiss you," Carl interjected. "I just did it to shut you up."

Vanessa wiggled her tongue at him, making a face. "Kissy-kissy, Carl Hanson is a lip-wrestler!"

"We should get going," Carl said, pushing off from the stairs and starting down the street—but not before he flicked Vanessa off.

She chattered cheerfully all the way home.

* * *

Alyssa was unusually silent as she and Carl rounded the corner of Ermine, slowly ascending the uphill slope until they reached 19830. She set herself down on the grass beside the brick mailbox in front of her parents' house and undid the straps of her blades, removing them one at a time. When she stood to face Carl again, he was suddenly four inches taller.

"Well," she said quietly and with a smile that was difficult to muster. "Thanks for walking me home once again."

"No prob."

A pause, an uncertainty as to what was the right thing to do at the moment—and then she suddenly found herself wrapping her arms around him, trying to get an impression of his body that she could take with her indefinitely.

He held her and smoothed her hair with his hand. "Aly..." he said began, and lifted her head with his hands.

Their eyes met, and she was his in that moment. Whatever feelings she'd been accumulating for him over the past year or so suddenly came flooding uncontrollably over her. It didn't matter anymore, all the anxiety and nervousness over admitting she liked him, all the worry of how to tell him, how to make it right. She just wanted to be with him, to let him know that she wanted to be with him. It didn't matter how he reacted, or if they never saw each other again after this moment. She only knew she needed him now.

"You don't have to if you don't want to," she whispered slowly, "but would you kiss me? I mean, I know it might be stupid—"

"It's okay," he interrupted, smiling sweetly. Always so polite, so tender. He leaned in close so she could reach him. The kiss was much quicker than the one he'd given Vanessa, but quite potent nonetheless. For the moment their lips touched, he was all around her: his arms holding her, his breath mingling with hers, his odor of sweat, shampoo, and the outdoors filling her senses. Even after the day's physical exertions, he still smelled nice. Sweet, not sour.

He pulled back afterward, licking his lips. "You taste like strawberries."

"Oh," she replied, blushing and looking away. "It's...I use Chapstick."

He giggled. "You're fruity."

"You dork."

"See you tonight, then?"

"Sure thing."

"Cool." He let go of her, jumping briskly from the curb. As he glided down the street he yelled out, "Don't worry! It'll be fun!"

Yeah, Alyssa thought to herself. It'll be fun.

* * *

"Bedtime."

Alyssa started, ever so slightly, and found that her father was standing behind her, peering over her shoulder. She'd been concentrating so diligently that she hadn't heard him come out into the backyard. The delicate insect sounds emanating from the surrounding backcountry, the trickling of water wafting from the kitchen as Mrs. Newman finished up the night's dishes, the distant rumble of the skyway—she'd tuned out everything but the LCD of her camera, which was mounted on a squat tripod and aimed skyward.

Clearing her throat, Alyssa straightened some, pulling back her unclad hair. "Five more minutes, dad."

Mr. Newman put his arm around her, kissing her hair. "Sweet, you have school tomorrow."

"Five minutes max, I promise. If I shut the camera off now I'll lose an hour's worth of work."

"Five minutes, and not a minute more."

Her father straightened, letting her go and peering up into the sky, an infinite indigo speckled with glittering stars. "Nice night," he said, smiling playfully. "Nice and clear. You find any aliens yet?"

"Dad," giggled Alyssa. "Aliens are bogus. I'm making a weather map."

"Oh, so you're a meteorologist now? I thought last week you were a metaphysicist."

Alyssa leaned over the camera once again, talking as she worked. "It's for a club assignment. We're researching fireflies—a phenomenon like the Northern Lights, but accompanied by small fairy or angel-like creatures. People see them all the time, but it's nearly impossible to track or predict where they'll appear. The only thing we have to go by is weather, moon shifts..."

Mr. Newman paid his daughter an inquisitive glance. "You don't believe in aliens, yet you believe in fireflies?"

"Not really, no. I believe people are seeing some sort of natural phenomenon, something that takes their breath away. There's no explanation for it, so they look for some kind of symbol to give it meaning. Like when people see the Virgin Mary in a thundercloud. It's not really the Virgin Mary, but people perceive it as such."

"That's not something I would discuss frankly with anyone but your closest friends." Mr. Newman folded his arms, shook his head slightly. "I should have taken you to church when you were younger."

"I've read the Bible."

"I know, but...sometimes when you see something, and you don't understand it, even if you perceive it as something that's not really there...sometimes it can be all the more significant that way. Sometimes the fantasy matters more than the reality."

Alyssa straightened, facing her father. She furrowed her eyebrows. "But no one knows."

Mr. Newman chuckled, facing the stars again. "No, no one really knows until they die, I suppose. Then it probably all makes sense. But while we're alive here on Earth all we have is our belief, our faith."

Alyssa studied him for a moment, studied this thirty-something, towheaded man who was her father, her personal confidant in most cases. While her mother was the down-to-earth parent, focusing mostly on her daughter's academic and athletic needs, Mr. Newman was the behind-the-scenes advocate who often took it upon himself to tackle Alyssa's emotional needs. When her feelings were hurt, or her heart broken, he was there, offering a shoulder to cry on, a reassuring voice to make everything better.

Carl suddenly popped into her mind. She blinked and shook her head slightly, repressing the urge to draw comparisons between her best friend and her father.

"Okay," she murmured, shutting off her camera and folding up the tripod. "I'm finished for tonight."

Mr. Newman leaned in for a kiss. "Love ya', sweet," he said.

Alyssa pecked him on the cheek and left him stargazing.

* * *

8/25/2074

Dear Journal,

The final weekend of summer vacation has been a busy one for the Urban Prophets. We've attempted to wrap up our research concerning the firefly mystery through a series of online interviews. Tonight will be our field report; we will be meeting with one of our contacts, who has promised us a front-row seat to one of the swarms. Tomorrow, well, tomorrow school starts.

It will be my first school year without Carl, whose parents have decided to relocate to Los Angeles. A part of me is happy since he will be joining the best swimming team in the county, and that's what he wants. The jealous part of me wants to keep him all to myself, though. I know I will be busy this year with gym, as I've decided (like Carl) to continue doing competitive athletics at school. I'll be concentrating on other things. Maybe

it will even be bearable, eventually.

As for the club, I can't see us splitting up, but there's going to be a period of inactivity as we sort ourselves out. My coaches all say it gets tougher in junior high, as this is when we start actually competing for college money. I can't complain, since they're all cool about it. There's just a lot of work to do.

I don't know. Maybe I've just gotten used to being a kid. I'm really going to miss...now. It may not make sense, but, well, I guess it had to happen sometime.

I will update my journal again after tonight's assignment is finished.

~Alyssa Newman

* * *

Alyssa sat, bare legs draped over the edge of her desk, notebook propped in her lap, and slowly gazed about her bedroom. Her "office" took up one corner of the room and consisted of a cluttered desk and billboard (which displayed a number of metaphysics-related news articles and photographs). It had served quite well as her center of operations for the past two years. To the right of the desk was her dresser and mirror, half covering the sliding door frame of her closet. To the left, her weight-training machine and a small stand displaying a handful of medals and trophies from various gymnastics meets.

Mix n' match, she thought. Nothing fitting together quite right.

Momentarily, Mrs. Newman stuck her head into the room and reminded her daughter that it was half past nine.

"I know," Alyssa said with a sigh as she rose from her desk. "I was just turning in. Goodnight, mom."

She closed the bedroom door, turned off the lights, and stripped down for bed. There would be no problem sneaking out later, for she and her parents had come to an understanding in recent years: Once the lights went out and the clothes came off, her bedroom was off-limits. No one would check her in the middle of the night, no one would discover her absence.

She slid between the sheets and lay curled up with her PDA clutched in her hand. She managed to stay awake until ten-thirty, at which point her drowsiness got the better of her and she dozed fitfully.

* * *

"Hey, Alyssa. Wake up."

Alyssa convulsed suddenly in her bed, gasping as she sat up. She blinked into the semi-darkness, the translucent screen of her dreams fading away, blending into the murky details of her bedroom. She'd fallen asleep, she realized. She'd been dreaming of something unusual, perhaps even something unpleasant—

"Um, Alyssa? I can see your crack."

Alyssa pulled back her hair and arranged the sheets around herself before picking up her PDA. Carl's face glowed reassuringly on the tiny screen. He was clad in a long-sleeved black pullover and a beanie with The Revisions (his second-favorite punk band) printed across the

front.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure." Alyssa rubbed her eyes and checked the time. "Just a bad dream. You're ten minutes late."

Carl shrugged. "The night bots are being ornery tonight. Anyway, me and Nessa are at Sky Blue. Hurry and get over here. Oh, and make sure you stay out of the light when you come down, okay?"

"Right."

* * *

Blading to Sky Blue Mesa Elementary was a bit tricky at such an early hour, for there was a curfew in effect. Alyssa stuck to the shadows, cutting through neighbors' backyards whenever possible, and venturing into a lighted area only when she had to cross Glasser to reach the soccer field. From there she met up with her companions, and they skated together to Moon Canyon Trailer Park, half a mile north along Whites Canyon.

"Maggie Yelchin, J-22," Vanessa said, reading off her PDA as they turned onto a long strip of dirt road that perforated the trailer park.

Moon Canyon was a manmade abscess just south of Plum Canyon. It served mostly as a debris field for the West Sierra Skyway. The area was nestled between two low hillsides, napped with wispy tall grass and gangly sycamores, discarded car parts and jettisoned fuel cells—and presently bathed in an unearthly glow being cast by the aggravated clouds above. It was like a black and white analog film that had been colorized badly: the soil was a sulfuric yellow, the grass an almost neon lime-green, the neatly-aligned mobile homes' metallic finishes glinting like polished sterling.

"Look at that," Carl murmured, his gaze alternating between the stormy sky and the skin of his hands, which now had an aqua hue to it. He rolled up his sleeves. "I'm turning into Casper."

"Your eyes are yellow too!" Vanessa exclaimed. She looked down at herself, marveling in the phenomenon. "It's like being in a room full of black lights, only better. You think so, Aly?"

Alyssa swallowed, her eyes transfixed on the storm clouds. "I think this is going to be one humongous swarm."

Carl studied the spectacle alongside his companions for a moment, the magnetic fields of their airblades humming and crackling. "Let's find Maggie," he said at last, and started down the road.

The girls followed, Alyssa recording everything with her camera. Evidently, the mysterious cloud cover seemed to be localized within the trailer park's general area. According to previous documentation, such atmospheric disturbances were commonplace, but never had anyone reported anything of this size. The sky looked as if it might split open at any moment.

Maggie Yelchin's trailer was located at the rear of the park, where a shallow mound straddled the skyway's protective mesh. Several hundred yards up in the air was the Sierra, a winding track of flickering skyway markers. Cars sped by at regular intervals, resulting in an ever-present mist (the bi-product of most modern hydrogen-powered vehicles) that rained down from above and caused the mesh to sizzle and crackle.

"She must never get any sleep," Vanessa commented as they entered a small yard sectioned off by a squat white plastic fence. Several colorful children's toys lay scattered about the grass.

Carl snickered. "For the rent, I could sleep through a car crash." He hopped onto a rickety wooden platform positioned at the foot of the trailer's door, and knocked loudly.

Momentarily, a tired-looking, thirty-something blonde answered. She smoothed the sides of her bedraggled hair with her hands and squinted at the children.

"Yes?"

Alyssa glided forward. "Maggie Yelchin?"

"Yes? What's this about?"

"I'm Alyssa Newman. We spoke earlier about the fireflies?"

Maggie blinked. "You're Alyssa?"

"Yeah." Alyssa gestured at her friends. "This is Carl and Vanessa. We're the Urban Prophets." A pause as she revealed her wooden DHC badge and tried to think of how to make her introduction more...official. "We're, um, from the Goblin's Club."

"Yes, yes I know," Maggie said with a chuckle. She stepped out into the ethereal night, closing the trailer door behind her and wrapping her arms about herself. "I just...you're all so much younger than I'd expected. You know it's a little late to be skating around town by yourselves?"

Carl snorted. Vanessa blushed. Alyssa bit her lip and wished she'd taken Mackie with them, especially if Maggie was going to make their underage status an issue.

She forced herself to respond: "Well...we are on assignment. This kind of phenomenon can't be properly documented unless an effort is made by the investigative community to do just that. In this case we lose a little sleep."

Maggie smiled, looking just the slightest bit charmed. "All right. Uh, how does this work?"

Alyssa raised her camera. "I'd like to do a quick interview, if there's time."

"Okay," said Maggie, and she gazed out across the shimmering valley. "I'd say we have about half an hour or so. You see that greenish mist up there? Kinda underneath the clouds?"

Hitting the "record" button on her camera, Alyssa nodded. "Yeah."

Maggie continued, "Well, it kinda settles down to the ground in these snaky sort of funnels, right over there out of the light of the skyway. That's where you can see them. They hug the ground in swarms. From here it looks like a bunch of glowing fog. Patches of fairy dust, as I, uh, like to call it."

"And you never told anyone about them?" asked Carl.

"I did once, when I first moved here a couple years ago. Scared the shi—sorry—I mean scared me to death. I called the police, but by the time they got here the fireflies had all gone. They only stick around for a couple minutes at most each time, you see."

Alyssa focused the camera on Maggie's face. "How do you know when there's going to be a swarm?"

"Well, that came later," Maggie said, fidgeting with her hair again. "Like I said, I've been living here for a couple years, mostly without problems. Every August, though, I hear this howling in the air—not like wolves or anything, but...you ever seen one of those classic racing cars, the ones with the rubber tires? In the races, they're going over a hundred on the speedway and you hear the howling of the tires against the track—it's like that, except there's no track

out here. So I can hear them coming before they actually come. Sometimes a day, a couple days before they show up I'll just hear this howling. And then there's a night like this, and I just know I'm going to see them again." She fell silent, gazing out across the valley once more. "Shh. You hear it? They're coming..."

The children looked at each other nervously, listening as a sudden breeze sprayed runoff from the skyway onto their hair and faces. Sure enough, a distant hum, an ethereal buzzing could be heard as if floating in the air all around them.

Carl wiped some moisture from his face. "What do you think they are?"

Maggie sighed, swallowed. "I don't know, except that they've been in my dreams ever since I first saw them. I hear that same howling too. Like a thousand screams all at once. I hear them now and I almost get flashbacks, memories of things I've never done, places I've never been—all so vivid, so real."

Alyssa suddenly became preoccupied, holding the camera steady, but recalling her own dreams from earlier in the evening. Something about fireflies...

"It's not just me, though," Maggie continued. "Friends, family—people all over are talking about things like...I don't...it's like something big is going to happen, but nobody knows what. We're all getting bits and pieces in dreams, but nobody can see the big picture. I don't mean to scare you or anything, but I think the fireflies are a sign, a warning maybe...I don't know."

Thunder rolled. Lightning flashed somewhere in the broiling cumulonimbus like a cry of pain, an aching wound that suddenly split open in a downpour of piercing water droplets.

Maggie nodded, covering her head with her arms. "They're here. It always rains when they're here."

Alyssa squatted and stuffed her camera into her backpack. "Have they ever hurt you?"

"No," Maggie replied, shaking her head. "Of course, I've always kept my distance...but they don't seem to be out to get anyone."

"Good," Carl said with a smile, "because I don't feel like getting bitten tonight." With that he pushed off from the platform and glided towards the end of the trailer park. When he noticed the girls weren't following, he stopped and turned around. He held out his hands. "You coming or what?"

After a brief hesitation, Alyssa and Vanessa thanked Maggie for her input and skated to where Carl waited.

Just after they cleared the mesh together, Maggie called after them, "Be careful."

The Prophets skated slowly into the flickering darkness, Carl leading with his flashlight. They were a good distance from the trailer park (now a distant cluster of shimmering lights) when the rain suddenly stopped and all was eerily quiet.

"Stop," Alyssa said, tugging on Carl's sweater. She looked up at the sky, studied the swirling mist, which seemed to be dancing over their heads, considering whether or not to descend further. "Stay right here...everyone turn off their lights."

"Aly, what—"

"Shh. Just do it." She crouched close to the ground, motioning for her companions to follow suit. "We might scare them off with all our lights."

Carl looked doubtful. "How do you know?"

"Well, I don't know, but—"

"Wait, look," Carl hissed, covering her mouth—as well as Vanessa's—with his hands. He

pointed towards a clump of trees a handful of yards off. There was motion in the darkness, the sound of footfalls hitting wet ground, someone coming towards them—

"Ha!"

The girls screamed (more out of surprise than terror) as Gary Barnett and the rest of the Neomancers flicked on their flashlights and came bursting out of the darkness like howling specters. Gary grabbed Carl around the neck, hauling him to his feet and grinding his knuckles into his scalp.

"Woohoo!" Gary howled. "You see that? Little Hanson was scared out of his mind!"

The others laughed as Carl pulled himself free and swore out loud. His cheeks were flushed bright red.

Gary laughed. "Oh, what's the matter? You think we were some kind of horribly deformed mutants coming to snack on your brains?"

Carl scowled, imitating Gary's tone. "Oh, what's the matter? Did you think we were the police coming to break up your little circle-jerk?"

"Hey, screw you, Hanson—"

"Guys!"

Alyssa had gotten to her feet and was regarding both Carl and Gary with a stern, matter-of-fact expression. "We didn't come here to pick a fight. We came here to do research."

Gary glanced at her, sneering. "Same here. Word has it your trailer trash friend thinks this is a good place to see a swarm. Judging by the weather, I'd say she just might be right. Lucky for us."

"You've been spying on us!" Vanessa exclaimed.

"Yeah, Gary," said Carl. "You're cramping our style. We were here first."

"You weren't anywhere first," Gary responded, stepping in close to Carl now. "Remember that. I could call the cops right now, tell 'em there's a bunch of twelve-year-olds running around past curfew. Yeah...wouldn't your parents love to see you getting escorted home by the bots, your faces plastered all over every police receiver in the county. It'd be bedtime at seven-o sharp until the day you turn eighteen."

Carl glanced questioningly at Alyssa, who appeared to be lost for words. What could she say? The Urban Prophets were minors, and they were breaking curfew.

"Yeah," Gary continued, facing Carl once again. "Your dad will probably whoop your butt real good. Maybe give you matching scars this time." He touched Carl's chin, at which point the younger boy swatted at him with his fist. The two were suddenly at each other's throats.

"Stop it!" cried Alyssa, stumbling forward. One of Gary's friends grabbed her around the waist, restraining her. She started kicking and thrashing. "Nessa! Get help! Nessa!"

Vanessa didn't answer. In fact, she was no longer within the circle of light. Gary, straddling Carl on the ground, halted his assault long enough to look up and shout, "Where the hell's their friend?"

Before anyone could answer, the sky suddenly flared brightly, and the air became filled with the fireflies' horrendous howling—only this time the effect was intensified tenfold. The youth who'd been holding Alyssa let her go, and she stumbled to the ground. Immediately she retrieved her camera, attempting to hold it steady while she used her free hand and shoulder to shield her ears from the noise. She could see Gary in her peripheral vision. He rolled off Carl and shouted at his companions to run back to their car and fetch their cameras.

Carl staggered to his feet, a thin stream of blood dripping from his mouth. His face was caked with bits of grass and mud.

"Nessa!" he called. He squinted into the trembling darkness and spotted her standing several feet away from himself and the others. She was paralyzed, shoulders slumped, mouth hanging somewhat open in a zombie-like grimace. The air about her had become electrified as the swarm funneled down from the sky and enveloped her body. Their frenzied motions tousled her hair, ruffled her her clothes, manipulated her limbs as if she were a lifeless doll.

The urgency of the situation began to dawn on everyone as they were suddenly caught in a deluge of icy water droplets carried on the violent wind. Alyssa dropped her camera and threw herself to the ground, covering her head with her hands to protect herself from the assault. Between tightly clenched fingers, she glimpsed Gary crawling towards her.

"Gary!" she shouted, her voice hardly carrying over the fireflies' shrieking. "We have to help her!"

Gary was several feet closer to the swarm than Alyssa was. With wild, frightened eyes, he glanced at Vanessa, then at Alyssa, and then down at the ground, where Alyssa's camera lay.

Don't do it, Alyssa screamed inside her head. Don't be a jerk...

Somewhere behind her, Carl was yelling something unintelligible. Gary turned to face the swarm once more, shifted himself into a low crouch as if getting ready to pounce—but at the last moment, he faltered.

"I'm sorry!" he yelled, and scooped up Alyssa's camera. He departed, leaving the children to fend for themselves.

Alyssa eyed the swarm again. Vanessa's body was still rippling as if she were made of paper. Something had to be done right now.

"We have to grab her!" Carl shouted. He was crouching beside Alyssa now, cupping his hands around his mouth.

"But what if—"

"Stay here! If something happens to me, I want you to run and get help!"

There was no time to protest, for Carl suddenly launched himself at the swarm as Alyssa watched in horror. She fully expected him to become swallowed up, just as Vanessa had. However, just as he came into contact with the funnel, it abruptly dissipated, and the rain stopped. All became silent and tranquil once again.

"Ness!" Carl yelped, catching her in his arms as she toppled forward, unconscious.

Alyssa rushed forward, offering her support. "Is she still breathing?" she asked. She took hold of Vanessa's wrist to feel for a pulse—

—and suddenly everything around her flashed, a million freeze-frames assaulting her all at once.

"Ah!" she cried out, jerking her hand away. She closed her eyes, wincing as her brain sorted itself out. "D-don't touch her, Carl...something's..."

"Aly, calm down," came Carl's voice. "It's okay, I've got her...we'll call an ambulance...Aly?"

Alyssa opened her eyes again, blinked away the tears that had suddenly welled up behind her eyelids. "I'm...I'm okay. I just, I saw..." She trailed off, wiping her face with her sleeve.

"Saw what?" asked Carl.

She looked at him, saw the concern in his eyes. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him...but no, not now. Not here. Vanessa was injured.

"Nothing," she said. "Let's just get some help—"

At that moment, Vanessa convulsed suddenly, sitting up and taking in large gulps of air as if she'd been holding her breath underwater. She eventually calmed down and looked questioningly at her friend.

"What happened?"

Alyssa immediately felt the tension in her gut release. She almost laughed with relief as she replied, "They came—they were all around you, Nessa. Don't you remember?"

Vanessa's expression turned curious. "No...I was standing next to you guys when Gary—hey, where'd the Neomancers go? Guys? What's happened?"

"We'll explain on the way home," Carl answered, getting to his feet. "Can you walk?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Let's split before someone finds us out here."

* * *

The journey home was uneventful. Carl and Alyssa dropped off Vanessa half a block from her parents' house.

"Are you guys sure you aren't putting me on?" she asked, eying her friends warily.

Alyssa looked at Carl, whose worried expression matched her own. Vanessa insisted she was fine, despite the revelation that she'd been swallowed by a swarm during her memory lapse. She hugged Alyssa, wished Carl good luck with his move in the morning, and then skated quietly down the street.

"I don't think she believes us," Alyssa murmured as she and Carl headed eastward. When they reached Ermine, they glided slowly up the hill like they'd done so many times before—only now something was missing. It was as if Carl was already gone, as if all familiarity and comfort had left the neighborhood, leaving behind the empty shells of houses and trees.

"How about you?" whispered Alyssa when they reached the back gate of her parents' house. "Are you okay?"

Carl nodded, and slicked back his matted hair. His lower lip was bruised and swollen, though he seemed to be dealing well with his wounds. "I guess that's the one good thing about leaving tomorrow. I won't have to put up with Gary's crap anymore."

"That's for sure. I can't believe he stole my camera. How am I gonna get it back?"

"Let it go for now," Carl said, giving Alyssa one last hug (a polite one this time, with none of the ardor of their former interlude). "We've had enough to deal with today."

"Yeah...I guess we sort of went out with a bang." Alyssa bit her lip. "Carl...I have to tell you something."

"What?"

"It's weird, I...I don't know, but...I have these dreams sometimes. Like something big is going to happen and I'm seeing a part of it before it actually does."

Carl wrinkled up his nose. "Okay...that's strange."

"I mean, I'm not psycho or anything, but I think I dreamed of the swarm tonight, before I met you guys. Maybe I was just imagining what it would be like. You know, like when I'm going to have a big gym meet the next day, and I'm laying it all out in my head the night before. But when I touched Vanessa out behind the trailer park...I saw it all again, Carl. All at once." She

looked up into Carl's eyes, searching for an answer.

He looked thoughtful for a moment. "Dunno. Maybe you're like those people who can feel the rain in their bones before a thunderstorm. You know, like when dogs seem to know there's going to be an earthquake or tornado before the rest of us do. That was a big swarm tonight—I don't see why it couldn't have messed with your head in some way."

"So you think...I mean...but how do you know?"

"I don't. Sometimes nobody knows. Things just are." He smiled and let her go as he started down the street. He murmured "goodbye" over his shoulder.

Alyssa wasn't sure if he'd understood her. Perhaps he was too weary to give it any serious thought at the moment. She turned away and started climbing the side gate, which would give her access to her bedroom window.

"Alyssa."

She looked behind her. Carl had made his way back to the edge of the sidewalk. "I've always thought of you as more than just a sister," he said, managing a wan smile. Then he was off, gliding down the hill and silently disappearing around the corner.

For a few minutes thereafter she sat straddling the gate, and watched the street as the trees rustled gently in the breeze, casting moving shadows on the pavement, filling the night air with nature's subtle tenor.

Eventually, she hopped onto the ground, crept through her bedroom window, and stumbled onto her bed without even removing her blades. Surprisingly, she was unable to fall asleep (despite the fact that she was quite exhausted). She tossed and turned until she came to lie facing the window.

That's when she saw it. A spark of emerald-green light moving about in the darkness of the backyard.

Firefly, she thought, her heart skipping a beat. She slipped out of bed and removed her blades without taking her eyes off the window. Part of her was adamant about finding some sort of camera to take a photograph with—perhaps her webcam—but no, that would only work with her notebook computer, and it would take too long to turn it on. She would have to satisfy herself with what her eyes showed her, what her brain recorded.

She opened the window with painstaking care and climbed outside. She crouched on the grass and remained motionless for a moment as she watched the firefly dance about the undergrowth. There was no indication of a swarm nearby—this one had either lost its way or else come here intentionally.

It's followed me home, Alyssa thought as she crawled along the ground, edging her way closer while trying to make as little noise as possible. She was succeeding rather well when the firefly, apparently alerted to her presence, suddenly fluttered several feet up into the air.

She jumped to her feet, her arms outstretched. Wait! Don't leave yet!

The creature hesitated, poised above the yard, ready to dart off into the night. However, after a decisive moment, it began to descend toward her. She held out her hands, palms upturned, creating a small platform for the firefly to land on. When it touched her skin, her whole body shivered, and she found herself smiling suddenly as an overwhelming sense of well-being filled her from head to toe.

It was beautiful: Small, delicate wings made of light illuminated a slim, vaguely humanoid figure. There were no refined bodily features (such as a face), no indication whether the creature

was male or female. It just was.

Alyssa was disappointed when it leapt off her fingers and disappeared over the treetops...but she wasn't sad. The feeling of utter contentment continued to flow through her, just as it had at Moon Canyon. The difference now was in the clarity. When she'd touched Vanessa (after the swarm had enveloped her), everything had come in all at once, a million tiny signals—undecipherable. Taken individually, though, the message was crystal-clear:

Everything is going to be okay.

Eyes wide with wonder, she watched the sky for several more minutes before retiring to her bedroom.

As she drifted off to sleep, she realized that she still didn't know what the fireflies were all about, but (for the moment) it was okay—she was okay.

That was all the comfort she needed.

The End

Jesse Gordon, aka A. J. Thompson, lives in California. His other publications have appeared in Anotherealm, Aphelion, Dimensions, and Shadowkeep. About the setting of his story "Swarm" he says, "Sometimes the most ordinary circumstances are home to magical qualities unintelligible to the naked eye, unless you know where to look. Being a California child, I've come to realize that Canyon Country is one of those places where the mundane and the extraordinary frequently have the opportunity to interact as one."

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"I found what I sought," I answered. That made her smile.

"Can't you give a dying woman a straight answer?" she asked.

I placed fetishes in a neat row by her side. "There may not be enough magic left."

"That's better. And if there is not?"

"Then I have killed you."

She took my hand and would not let me pull away. I turned my face from her. The one person who did not flinch from my face could no longer see it. Still I turned it away.

"What aren't you telling me, Carlos? I feel you turn away. Why won't you look at me?"

I shut my eyes tight. I don't want you to see, to sense somehow. I don't want you to know what I have done. But I said nothing. She started to cough and could no longer keep my hand. I slid it away and started the spell. As I spun, her coughs subsided, and she grew quiet. When I finished, her eyes were closed, and I thought her asleep; she looked so peaceful. What fetishes I hadn't used I carefully packed in my pouch. I left nothing of value in the shanty, except Clarissa. I watched her for a moment, and then stood to leave. As I reached the door she spoke up.

"Am I better? I feel better."

"Good," I said, without turning back. "I may be gone for a while. Try to get some sleep."

"I will. Be careful, Carlos," she said.

I stood there for a moment. I knew she wanted me to turn back, look into her face, even though she couldn't see. But I couldn't. My spinning only stalled the disease. Stronger magic was needed for a cure. But I'd stopped the disease from progressing for a while. If she got much worse…no, I couldn't think of that. I left without another word.

In the sky, the sun was headed for the mountains in the distance. That would cool things a bit, a welcome relief. Around the hex people gathered laundry for the evening, and some lit cook fires. I picked my way across the rows toward the towers. They loomed high, but were farther than they seemed. Nearly across the city.

"Yer a spinner, ain't ya? I can tell by the way ya carry yerself," a woman said as I passed her shanty. She lived on the outer rows and decorated her place with carpet hangings. She'd been here a while. "Me husband is a highbooter."

I wouldn't have stopped, but she stood to block my way.

"They ain't findin' no answer, is they?"

"Not likely," I said, turning my gaze on the woman and letting her see my eyes. She didn't flinch.

"I seen yer kind before, ya got nothing left anyway," she said.

"What is it you want?" I asked, feeling an itch to move on, get past this hag.

"I want ya to find 'em. He's a lout, but he's my lout. They took 'em up there," she said, craning her neck at the towers. "That's where yer goin', right?"

She must have seen me looking at them. That and the way I held myself had been enough. Street smarts. But I had other things to do. "No."

That should have been the end of it. I had no time for lost husbands. But as I walked around her, she said something that cut through me like dark fey.

"I say he's a highbooter, but truth be told he's a soul trader. He's got four of 'em stashed somewhere. That's why they took 'em."

Four souls. All the power I needed. All the power a lot of people needed. A lot of desperate people.

"Bring back me husband. Maybe he'll be grateful," she said.

I continued past her, not giving her an answer. Would it come to that? Dealing with a soul trader? How far would I go for a cure?

* * *

The towers were guarded. Only the Highmage would come to the end of magic and use it to build towers. Intellectually I knew no proof existed of a tie between the drain and usage, but when people died across the realm for lack of heat and failed crops, it seemed wasteful. The guard inserted himself between me and the door. He probably stopped a dozen people each hour, and more with each day. I would not be so easily stopped. I lifted my head and met his gaze.

"Nobody beyond this point, it…" he stopped, and backed away into the door. "Forgive me Sir, enter. I will send for Master Paul."

He hastily unbarred the door and removed himself from my path. The unfinished walls and floors of the inner tower gave me some measure of assurance. At least the Highmage conserved that much. I stood at the bottom of the spiral staircase staring at a stain on the floor and wondering about the story it might tell, while the guard hurried up the steps to inform "Master Paul" of my arrival. I didn't have to wait long.

Paul appeared near the bottom of the stairs. Another useless show. I would not be fooled by the illusion of walking the last few steps, with flowing white robes and hair to match. He had teleported the first hundred.

"Carlos, have you come to help after two hundred years?" he asked.

"There is no answer, Paul," I said.

His anger flared in ways I remembered all too well. "And so we should give up? Why are you here then? I don't have time for…"

"I brought it back," I interrupted.

"It?" He paused, looking into my eyes, searching through his memory. "The plague?"

"Clarissa has it. There was a variation of Miners Epidemic in Mountain Guard. It had the markings of the plague, though less virulent. I knew the cure would be similar."

"You infected her to test the cure, and then the drain began. You fool, you've killed us."

I bit back my first reply. "I've kept it in check. She is not contagious yet. I can still cure her. I need whatever you've got left."

"If we succeed you will have all you need."

"If you fail, everyone, everyone, dies. The plague doesn't require magic, only the cure."

"You don't need to lecture me on the plague. I worked for a decade on the cure. I saw it close hand."

I rested my forehead in my palms, tired of the argument already. "And I cured it."

He came the rest of the way down the steps and walked around me.

"Are you living in the hex? You smell of it. Any house would have you, but you won't even ask."

The start of another old argument. "Paul, help or don't help. I'm asking now."

He harrumphed, but his stern demeanor faded a bit. "Come, I want to show you something," he said. He climbed up the first few steps and then disappeared. I made a point of climbing every one.

The top of the tower contained Paul's workshop. It didn't take more than a cursory glance to see the dismal state of things. Books stacked against the walls so high they seemed threatened in their precariousness. Half-burned parchments, and dozens of minor fetishes. Not a major fetish in sight.

"I've got nothing left, haven't for months," Paul said. "I'm just keeping hope alive for those who need it. It's over Carlos."

"What about the soul trader you brought here?" I asked, not ready to give up yet.

"The souls of four children. Taken at their deathbeds, granted, but nothing I wanted to touch, not for a few last powerful spells I knew would solve nothing. He's locked in the room below. Take them if you want."

"Children, Paul…how could I?" I could barely get my head around such a thing. Most believed me a monster. I didn't mind that; I cultivated it. I had the power to create disease, and I used it. People would fear me no matter my intentions. Yet, I was not ready to become what they believed.

"We don't know souls come back," he said.

"No, we don't. But we can take them out, so they must exist for a reason."

"I can't tell you what to do. I'm dead either way. I've lived far beyond our natural lives, far older than even you know. When the magic here finally ends, so will I. I only want to stay up here in peace until then. Believe that I died giving hope."

I could say nothing to that. We each chose our own way to die. The one choice still left to us.

"Does she know?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No. I told her it was Woodcutter's fever."

I left him there and went down to the room below, which had a simple ward to lock it that I easily dispelled.

The soul trader spoke eagerly before I even got the door open.

"So you've changed your mind? What will you pay? My original…oh…my…you're not…" he broke into stammers.

I advanced on him, my blood pupils swirling, my hand outstretched. He shoved himself into a corner.

"You've got nothing left…nobody but me does…" he said, his voice near panic despite his brave words.

"Maybe," I said, and kept advancing across the room. I didn't know if I could do it, but I knew I would try. He would die of disease by my hand anyway; we all would.

"Take them…just take them. I don't care anymore. I should've given them away already. Nearly got my throat slit twice, got locked up, and now you. They are a curse," he said.

"Where are they?" I asked, stopping a few feet from him, my hand still outstretched to almost brush over his cheek.

"I hid them, I'll take you there…"

I held my position a bit longer. I could see the sweat forming on his brow and the slight tremble of his body. Finally, I dropped the arm to my side. "I don't know if I will use them," I said, suddenly feeling the need to justify myself to this man.

"Whatever. I'll take you, then just let me be," he said.

I nodded, and motioned for him to lead the way.

* * *

He agreed to stop by the hex. I needed to check on Clarissa. I would have gone whether he agreed or not, but I had grown tired of arguing over the past year, and preferred an easy consensus when I got one. I passed by the hag's shack, to show her I had done what she asked. She would still think me a monster, but I had long given up on that.

"I brought your husband back," I said, as she stood and walked toward us.

"Husband?" he said, glancing at the woman I had spoken with.

She was on him as quick as that.

"Baby killer, soul stealer! You took me baby!"

They went down in a tangle, and with the light of the waning sun I caught the flash of a dagger. I jumped into the fray. The woman was surprisingly frail and thin as I pulled her off the soul trader. Her baggy garments hid the starvation taking place underneath. She landed with a crack, and I feared I had broken something. The dagger protruded from the soul taker's chest, and he coughed up blood. I bent quickly to his side.

"Where are they?" I asked, trying to restrain my panic.

"Tepeldar impaterious," he said. Then his eyes went distant, and his breath stopped.

I turned my full anger on the woman. This time she shrunk from it.

"Do you know what you have done for the revenge of your child!" I yelled. Of course she didn't. I wouldn't say it. The words You have doomed the world would always sound silly, and solve nothing.

I turned from her and headed back to Clarissa. "Tepeldar impaterious" played over in my mind. I had to remember the phrase exactly. It was not a human tongue, and I didn't know it, but Clarissa would.

She was sitting up when I arrived. She still couldn't see, but she would be stronger for a few days before the plague advanced beyond the walls I placed.

"Carlos? What's wrong? I can hear it in your step," she immediately asked as I pushed open the door.

I sat beside her and took her hand.

"Tepeldar impaterious," I said.

She frowned. She opened her mouth to speak, then shut it again. Her frown deepened. "A king's death, loosely translated. Where…?"

"It doesn't matter," I said, and squeezed her hand.

"Carlos, I know I don't have Woodcutter's fever. I can't help if you won't let me in," she said, returning my squeeze.

I rested my head on her shoulder. I ached to tell her, but I feared the release. I needed the strength the pain gave me. I said nothing, once again.

"At least tell me about the translation," she said, fitting herself more tightly to my lanky frame.

"The last words of a dying soul trader," I said.

"Are you that desperate? I don't want my life saved in such a way."

"He was taking me to four souls. I don't know where he hid them. I…wasn't sure I'd use them."

"Wasn't sure? Carlos, I know you better than that. You are not…unless…what have you

given me? You've given me the plague, haven't you? Oh Carlos, I'm so sorry," she said, and pulled me tight. I pulled away and stood abruptly.

She tried to follow but didn't have the strength. "It wasn't your fault," she continued. "It is similar enough to Miners Epidemic, and you knew the cure. You couldn't have known…"

I ripped open the door; I didn't want to hear anymore.

"Carlos, wait! You can't make this decision alone!"

She was wrong. Alone was the only way I could make it.

* * *

I wandered the industrial district. The sun had finally set, and the streets were largely empty. "A king's death" floated through my mind. I had to believe it was a clue. If it wasn't…no… it had to be.

The realm hadn't had a king in some time. The council of regents ruled. When Mumsfree had died with no heir, they simply didn't replace him. A king's death was in battle, but Mumsfree had fallen from his spire, old, drunk, and senile.

No battle field existed near Spells End. The settlement was called Black Flats until a year ago, and had boasted only a few dozen inhabitants, mostly cactus farmers. But it didn't take long for word to spread that the spell lamps still worked, when they failed across the realm. Spells End was born in a gold rush of magic and blood.

It did have a spire. Not the Highmage towers, which were far too well-guarded for the soul trader to have placed anything there, but a bell tower. It sat atop the Church of the Pure. I found it ironic that Purist farmers founded Black Flats. People who would not cast spells or use magic became the guardians of its last stand. The Church was mostly ignored by Spells End's new inhabitants, but not abandoned. The Purists never left and still guarded it, as if the inner chapel contained the answer to the drain.

The church wasn't far, somewhere past the industrial district toward boom town, where most of the original "gold" rushers still lived. If they could afford it. I could see the bell tower peeking over the low sweat shops. I picked through back alleys of hastily-erected dirt lizard skinneries and cactus-thread weavers. I'd never owned anything made of cactus-thread, but I could imagine.

The church came up quickly, and even as I approached I knew it was locked down tight. Why was nothing ever easy? I started to doubt that the souls were there. Purists would want nothing to do with them, and I couldn't see how the trader snuck inside. But I approached anyway. The doors looked solid enough, if a bit plain. By Highchurch standards this wreck of a building should be torn down. By Highchurch standards anything not made of marble should be torn down. In some ways I thought the Purists had it right. I knocked.

"The church is closed for the evening," came a man's voice through the door.

"I'll give you fifty crowns to use the bell tower," I replied. It was nearly all I had left, but it was a fair amount. In these times, in this place, stranger requests had been made and gone unchallenged.

"Fifty crowns? You aren't going to harm it or nothing?" I could hear his resolve waver.

"I won't harm a thing, or violate any church doctrine," I said. Not in the bell tower anyway. If I found the souls, and if I used them, I'd likely make the Purist founders a bit unhappy.

The door slowly opened, just enough for me to pass the coin inside. I did so. After a pause it swung the rest of the way, and a nervous hand urged me in.

"Be quick, and I never saw you," he said.

As I found the stairs and headed up, I heard the door shut and lock behind me. When I reached the top I glanced back, but the man was nowhere in sight. I slipped into the tower and closed the door. The floor was small but it had enough room for me to arrange a few of my last fetishes for a weak locator spell. It would barely cover the bell tower, but it would be enough. Making sure not to over-hurry, I spun the spell. Up and around and over I pulled the threads of magic until they formed the pattern I desired. They were so weak, it took longer than I expected. With a pop, they left, and a thin glow spread over the dim room.

I glanced around, looking for something bright. I found it tucked up high inside the bell. A very clever hiding place. The spell turned out to have been a good idea. I braced my legs on the guard rail and leaned out to reach up under the bell. It took several tries, but I got a hand on the small package and pulled it free. Carefully I swung back away from the bell onto solid floor. I set the package down and unfolded the protective cloth. Four soul gems were wrapped neatly up inside.

I had half-hoped not to find them. The decision was easy then - it was made for me. I rolled them back up and tucked the package under my shirt. Without thinking, letting the numbness that had threatened me for days take control, I stumbled back to the hex and Clarissa. I truly don't remember the walk. She was silent when I entered, but I could tell she had been crying. I sat down and took out the package.

I stared at it for a long time. She said a few things, but they ran off me like water, and I couldn't catch any meaning. Four children's souls for a world. How could anything come to a choice like this?

"…somewhere far away, where the plague won't spread. Maybe the ocean," her words finally broke through to me.

"We wouldn't get that far. We can't take the risk," I said.

"Then what?" she asked.

"I cure you. There is enough here to cure the disease, but…"

"Not to heal the damage it's done. I'm too far gone, aren't I?"

"I thought I could draw on more from Spells End. But the last spell I spun was so weak…"

"I won't say I'm not afraid, but it is what has to be done." She closed her eyes, though she was blind. An unconscious sign of resignation.

"We'll have time, a day or so, then the end will be quick," I tried to reassure her.

"Because the preservation spells have held my body up. When it breaks it will break quickly, probably my heart right?" she asked. Always smarter than me.

"Yes."

I placed the four soul gems around her body, and a finger gently over her lips to silence protests as I started the spell. I tried not to think about what I was doing. I focused simply on the cure. I had done it many times before. It was easy, automatic, safe. I drew from the first gem, and tried not to imagine I heard a scream. Then the second, then the third. The power swam around me, threads everywhere. I started to spin them. I hadn't felt this much magic in a very long time. Had I really taken it for granted for so many years? It rose up, it consumed me. I became high on it. Then it was over. I had used only three gems, which was something at least.

I could feel the magic still dancing around my hands. There was some left. Perhaps enough for one last gift to the woman I owed so much. I placed a hand over her eyes and focused. I felt the threads flow into her, healing, knitting. And then, with no sound, with no feeling, it was gone. I lifted my hand and her eyes fluttered open.

"I…I can see," she said.

I bent and kissed her. She was gentle at first, then she returned it with passion. We didn't make love. After two hundred years we had deeper things to share in her last days. I showed her Spells End, such as it was. I took her to say goodbye to Paul. We ate dirt lizard and talked about things that didn't matter. On the third day she died.

I took her into the foothills and buried her. I sat by her grave and wrote this all down, because I am not a monster. I hope someday this is read, and you will understand. I left it at her grave. After that, if all went well, I hanged myself.

The End

Mark C. Ford lives in Seattle, Washington, where he works as an executive. About writing Science Fiction and Fantasy he says, "In fantasy and science fiction, the imagination runs unchecked by normal social and physical boundaries. Writing is my way of rolling naked in the dandelions. Spells End was born from a writing group prompt and quickly became my first short story of note. I am honored by its acceptance into Deep Magic.

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and dashed across the hall to Gwyneth's room.

Sucking in a breath, Ry-anne pressed her ear to the oak door. The unfinished wood scratched at her earlobe. Ry-anne creased her nose. Pah. If Mammy Gamine and Pappy Johann were a high Pairing, then these doors would be varnished and Ry-anne would not get splinters every time she wanted to know if Gwyneth was awake. Not that she would want to be Paired with any yacky high born just so she could have a varnished door.

Ry-anne listened. Nothing. So Gwyneth must not be sleeping then, Ry-anne reasoned. For if she was in slumber, then surely Ry-anne would be able to hear snoring. She moved her head. Knocked softly. Pressed her ear back to the wood.

"Gwyneth!" she hissed. Listened. "Gwynnie?"

A creak from inside another one of the Family's rooms behind her startled her heart. It sounded like it had come from Mammy's room. Ry-anne's eyes darted about. But there were no more sounds. Desperate to get inside before anybody caught her about in her robe, she barged into Gwyneth's room.

The slats were still down on the windows, leaving the room swamped in velvet darkness with just slices of light eking through. Her eldest sister was sound asleep. "Lazy horse," Ry-anne muttered, unsure of what to do now, but hoping that her presence might actually wake Gwyneth up. She stared hard at her sister. Her long blonde locks shone like winter sunlight, smooth and perfect even when asleep. Ry-anne thought of her own chestnut tangles and wondered vaguely—and not for the first time—whether Gwyneth had put some sort of spell on her hair. After all, how could her perfect older sister be so perfect as to not have a hair out of place even whilst sleeping? Impatient now, Ry-anne gave Gwyneth the smallest and most gentle mental nudge.

At least she had intended to. Gwyneth tumbled out of bed. Her exposed shoulder struck the mahogany floor at a surprising angle and her rump came tumbling after. There was a jolting cry and Gwyneth landed with hair all over her confused face. Ry-anne tried not to feel satisfied… it was hard.

"Gwynnie! What's wrong? You have a bad dream? I mean, I only came in here 'cos I heard you moaning."

On the floor, Gwyneth smoothed down her eve dress all lady-like, whilst she glared death at Ry-anne. She got to her feet and then slipped back under the covers. "Hm, sure you did Ry. And while we're at this game, pray tell me when you're going to become the next Grand of Glandor?"

"Shuddup."

Gwyneth smiled. "Just no more practicing your mentals on me, ginger. Such stuff is for the schoolroom. 'Sides, you're too clumsy to be using it normally yet. Right?"

"Not ginger! Pappy Johann says my hair is 'rich chestnut' and as fiery and beautiful as the setting sun."

Gwyneth sniggered and rolled her eyes. At a mighty ten Seasons old, only Gwyneth could roll her eyes that well. Ry-anne had tried but it never worked so well for her. And worse, whenever Gwynnie caught her at it, she would just roll her eyes all the more.

"Whatever you say, babby. Now what do you want?"

"I am not a babby! I am only two Seasons less than you!"

"Huh. You are so a babby—just listen to babby whine. But maybe not for much longer, hey? I tell you Ry, you gotta grow up all of a sudden when you get Paired."

Ry-anne's ears pricked. She crawled to the edge of Gwyneth's bed, eyes bulging. "Why?"

Gwyneth leaned forward conspiratorially, blue eyes glittering. "Well," she began importantly. "To start with, your Pair will always be your best friend. But then, when you get as old as I am…it gets more."

"More?"

Gwyneth nodded deeply. "Mmhm. Like me and Davvy. You gotta solemn promise not to tell nobody this sister, or else I'll put a wicked spell on you and set your ginger hair on fire. Real fire this time."

Ry-anne sucked in her breath.

"You promise? Cross your heart set your head on fire?"

"Gwynnie!"

Gwyneth giggled and shook her head. "Alright I'll tell you…last night…"

"What? What happened?"

Gwyneth paused, thoughtful. Then an unstoppable grin sparkled on her flushed face. "Davvy kissed me," she blurted, then stared hard at Ry-anne before laughing and covering her face with both hands.

"He did?"

Gwyneth nodded quickly, beaming. Ry-anne was appalled; it was not proper. And especially from Gwynnie, who never did anything wrong. "My lips were tingling!"

"Gwyneth, that's so bad! You shouldn't let him do that—it's not allowed—it's…"

"Oh it was only a mental kiss, stupid. Those are allowed…at my age anyway." Gwyneth looked very pleased with herself.

"Oh."

Gwyneth rolled her eyes again and put on a wise face. "Honestly, sister. I think you're going to grow up to be a Priestess or something—you're far too sensible."

Ry-anne narrowed her eyes. As usual, Gwynnie was making out that she was the most important one. Even on the day of her Pairing, Gwynnie was taking over. And who'd want to kiss a boy anyway? Yack! Kissing was for Mammies and Pappies. Ry-anne vowed to never ever kiss a boy. Ever. "Well…at least I can climb the cider trees," she said at last.

Gwyneth laughed. "Hah! I take it back; you're not sensible at all. What kind of girl would want to climb trees? You're quite mad, Ry."

Ry-anne sulked. "Wassat s'posed to mean?"

Gwyneth was about to take it upon herself to explain when the door pounded. Mammy Gamine's angry voice boomed. "What's all that racket in there?"

Ry-anne ran to open the door. Mammy's stubby plump fingers instantly found her earlobe. They tweaked and Ry-anne yelped, but held the rest inside.

"You again. Honestly, Ry-anne," Mammy Gamine said, waddling towards Ry-anne's room, dragging Ry-anne with her. "I don't know why you insist on embarrassing your Father and I, cavorting around at this hour in your eve wear. And on a day like today as well. Grand knows who they'll manage to Pair you with—probably some stable boy."

Fat horse.

Mammy Gamine dumped Ry-anne down on the unmade bed. "I hope I didn't catch you name calling, Ry-anne."

Ry-anne shrank and looked down. "No Mammy."

Mammy Gamine's lips were pursed. Her broad features were covered in a sheen of sweat. She was breathing hard and Ry-anne felt a brief surge of concern for her health. Perhaps she did tax Mammy too hard. After all, Mammy did have seven other children to look after—and the other Mammies were not much help, because Mammy Helene was so ill and Pappy Mallun's Pair lived in the Dimension of the Dead.

"Now put on your special robe, and for Grand's sake do something with that mess," Mammy Gamine said, tugging Ry-anne's hair playfully and then tapping the tip of her nose.

Ry-anne wrinkled her face up and pretended not to like it. "Yes Mammy."

Mammy smiled and shuffled away, closing Ry-anne's door behind her. Ry-anne was full of good intentions until she heard Mammy talking to Gwyneth.

"Come Gwynnie, up now. Get dressed please."

"Yes, Mammy!" Gwyneth sang.

Ry-anne shuddered, thinking dark thoughts. "Yes, Mammy," she mimicked, dropping her eve robe to the floor and searching in the dresser for a comb. What a kiss-up Gwyneth was. Mammy wouldn't love her half as much if she knew what she got up to with Davvy. Ry-anne considered whether to tell on Gwynnie. But it was the day of Ry-anne's Pairing, and she was determined not to let that stupid sister or fat Mammy Gamine spoil it. So she would save Gwynnie's bad deed and use it against her later for something real good. Like maybe getting a second portion of pie.

Ry-anne wrapped her undergarments on and then tugged on her silky white special robe. She loved the way the light danced on the silk, like sun on the Green Sea that ran adjacent to the Fishing village. After dressing, she got to work on her hair and spent long moments trying first to tease then to rip out all of the knots. Her eyes were watering, but when she looked in the smudged glass and saw the girl with the black eyes and rich hair and white robe, she thought she looked quite pretty. Not beautiful like Gwyneth, but a little less like tree-climbing, messy-head Ry-anne. No harm in that for just one day.

Mammy Gamine came pounding down the corridor. Trotting around her and yanking at her robe were just half of her half brothers and sisters, all older than Ry-anne except for Kyna and Poor Nanne.

"Hi Wy-anne," said Kyna, twisting her ringlets.

"Hi Kyna," Ry-anne replied begrudgingly. Kyna was only sixteen months younger than Ry-anne, yet she still acted like such a babby.

Andee bounced in like a puppy and hid under the bed sheets. Andee and Kyna were both black haired, like Pappy Jenn.

"Get out of the bed, you mongrel!" Mammy hollered at Andee, whilst Pappy Mallun's shy blonde boy Hann started tugging the covers off Andee. "Ry-anne are you ready yet?"

"Yes Mammy," she said and pushed past Hann and Andee who were now play fighting in the center of the bedroom, her sheet over their heads. She'd wanted to do something special with her hair but couldn't wait. Besides, the Pairing was a private affair, between the two the Fates deemed right for each other at that particular time in their lives. And a morn without all her brothers and sisters sounded just delicious right now.

It was when she was out in the corridor catching her breath that Kyna started wailing.

"Mammy, Andee stood on my toe. On purpose Mammy!"

Ry-anne tried to roll her eyes like Gwyneth would, as Mammy started to try and organize

the rabble in her room, when Gwyneth stepped out of her bedroom. She was a vision in a cream silk special robe. Ry-anne felt instantly scruffy. How dare Gwyneth upstage her on her day!

Gwyneth was looking at her, expecting a protest, expecting a reaction for looking so beautiful. And the words of praise had been in Ry-anne's throat, half-realized, but she swallowed them down and folded her arms to sulk and wait for Mammy to say she could go to the ceremony room.

"For the last time give me that sheet!" Mammy ordered. A slap cracked and a moment later Andee appeared, his hair all scruffy from being under the covers, trying to pretend he didn't want to cry. He grinned at Ry-anne and Ry-anne bit her lip to stop from smiling. Gwyneth ruffled his hair and he screwed up his face like he hated it.

Just then, Mammy popped her head out of Ry-anne's bedroom, busy refolding the bed sheet. "Oh Gwyneth, don't you look beautiful!" Hann edged carefully out from around Mammy. Ry-anne felt a hot stab of anger and folded her arms tighter. "Hurry up, Ry-anne—you're going to be late. Go and say goodbye to all your Pappies and then you can go along to the ceremony room. We'll meet you afterwards in the meal hall. Got that?"

"Yes Mammy!" Ry-anne scurried down the corridor, feet slapping the wood.

"Walk, Ry-anne! And don't wake the rest of the House whilst you're at it."

Ry-anne caught her pace and forced herself to walk to Pappy Jenn's room. He was Andee and Ky's birth daddy. She found him in his own room, fixing an embroidered band around his waist, which went over a long, black robe that all the Pappy's would be wearing that day. Even her Pair's Pappy's would be dressed the same.

"Well, little Ry-anne. A momentous day, hey?"

"Mmhm," Ry-anne just wanted to get going. She noticed that sickly little Poor Nanne was in Pappy's bed, thin face flushed as she cuddled Mammy Helene, who was also sickly. Helene was always sickly—and no fun. Poor Nanne was Pappy Jenn's favoritest babby. One, because Pappy Jenn and Mammy Helene were Pairs and two, because she'd always needed so much care.

"Bet you want to run along to the ceremony room, don't you?" Pappy Jenn said, all kind but whispering so as not to wake Nanne and Helene.

"Mmhm. Gotta see Pappy Mallun and Pappy Johann yet though."

Pappy Jenn was hugely tall, but he leaned all the way down to give Ry-anne her very own kiss. "Good luck sweetheart. I shall see you in the hall afterwards."

"Yes Pappy. Thank you." Pappy Jenn was always sad seeming. Mammy Gamine said that he and Helene had birthed other babbies sides Kyna and Poor Nanne—Andee was Pappy Jenn's and Mammy Gamine's birth babby—but all of them were too weak to last in this Dimension and were given up to the Dimension of the Dead. Ry-anne thought this must have been why he always felt so sad and sort of…well, broken.

Pappy Mallun's room was the next chamber down the hall. Ry-anne braced herself. It was always rowdy in the House, with brothers and sisters and halfies and cousins and distant aunts and uncles flying around all over the place, but Pappy Mallun was old and had three of his own and no Mammy Pair to help him out. This meant his boys always got away with acting up. Geffray, Kall and Lyle were all older than Gwyneth, except Lyle who was almost exactly the same age. Which, for some reason, always seemed to make people raise their eyebrows when they found out. Geffray and Kall were ugly twins, and at twelve thought they could throw their weight around. All three were ginger like Pappy Mallun, which was rather unfortunate as it

provided sufficient evidence for Gwyneth's theory that Ry-anne was not really Pappy Johann's.

"Hi Pappy Mallun. I gotta run…late."

"Now just you wait there a moment," said Pappy Mallun in a broad village accent. Pappy Mallun had only got into the House on account of the fact he had partnered well, Gwyneth had said. He wasn't even Paired with anybody of Glandor descent, but she supposed the House needed new blood now and again.

But isn't Mammy Gamine from Ricefield town? Ry-anne would ask, but Gwyneth would just purse her lips and say, "Yes well, that's different."

The twins were staring, pulling faces behind their Pappy. She ignored them and tried to focus on Pappy Mallun, which was hard since she was so impatient and he had the most massive white beard, which kind of obscured his chubby face.

"You're not going till you give your Pappy a kiss," he sang and crouched down ready.

Ry-anne tried not to wrinkle her nose at the thought of getting all beard prickled and did as told. Then she ran off, Pappy Mallun chuckling merrily in her wake.

"So eager," he murmured, probably shaking his head too.

Ry-anne had saved the best till last. Trying to smooth her hair, she stepped into Pappy Johann's room. It was Pappy's side that was vaguely of Glandor descent—the large, extended Family dedicated to preserving the haven they were all so fortunate to enjoy. But that wasn't why Ry-anne loved him the most.

"There's my little princess!" said Pappy Johann, and he scooped her up in his strong arms, cuddling her tight. "Don't you look beautiful—we are growing up fast aren't we?"

That was why. Plus, Pappy Johann was her birth daddy, and unlike Mammy Gamine who had other babbies, Gwyneth and Ry-anne were Pappy Johann's only two. But he always made Ry-anne feel like she was the only one that really mattered.

Ry-anne giggled. "Yes Pappy, I am growing up fast. Getting Paired today."

"I know sweetness," Pappy said and set her down again but took her hand in his own paw. Pappy might have been strong, but he was just the right height. Not tree-like as Pappy Jenn was and not small, fat and sweaty like Pappy Mallun. It meant that he could hold her hand easily and she did not have to stretch up too much.

"I can't wait to get my Pair, Pappy. Do you know who it is? Mammy says it might be a stable boy, because they probly can't find anyone else to fit me. Do you know who it is though? But I wouldn't mind 'cos the Fates'd never get it wrong, would they?"

A laugh, warm like porridge. "No honey. The Fates won't get your Pairing wrong. Sometimes Pairs seem strange and as though they might never succeed, but you need to work to make your Pairing strong. There's good in everyone, darling. So be his best friend and he will be yours for the rest of your life."

Ry-anne frowned, trying to make sense of Pappy's information. She stored it, in case it would be useful someday. "But do you know who it is?"

"Of course not sweetheart! Only the Fates know that. A Pairing is a private affair and both families keep quiet when the Priestess informs them of the day of the meeting, so that they will not know before the Pairs do. But we will all celebrate afterwards. It's always been that way and rightly so. Here—" Pappy led her to his bookcase. "I have something for you."

"A book?" Ry-anne screwed up her face.

Pappy laughed and his dark eyes shone. Nobody else's did that. Nobody else's had time.

Mammy Gamine was always off overseeing the kitchen staff, and Pappy Mallun and Pappy Jenn were always busy monitoring the crops, or something boring at least, whereas Pappy Johann cultivated the House's beautiful gardens. Perhaps it was because his Allocation was not so stressful that Pappy Johann always had the time to make Ry-anne feel special.

"No. No books—not today," he said, "There's plenty of time for books and schooling. But this morn you want to be pretty. Here you are."

Ry-anne's mouth dropped. She sucked in air. Pappy had gotten a ribbon made. He must've had to go all the way to Pantherea to order that! The ribbon's broad white silk was tenderly embroidered with sweet ivory daisies and threaded with the occasional real one. It was beautiful. Her fingers, chewed nails and hangnails and all, traced the patterns delicately.

"Thanks!"

Pappy grinned and took it again. "I'll put it in," he said and turned her around. His big clumsy fingers snagged her hair a lot, but Ry-anne didn't say. That would be ungrateful. Eventually he managed the task and turned her back around.

"There," he said. "Now who's Pappy's pretty poppet?"

"Me!"

"That's right. Prettiest girl in the whole of Glandor." He kissed her forehead and then sent her off on her way.

"Bye, Pappy. See you soon!" She waved furiously before hurrying towards the ceremony room and her soon-to-be Pair.

TWO

Ry-anne fidgeted. The official cloth veil the Priestess had laid over her head was stuffy. It had bobbles on the inside and smelled of herbs. Itchy herbs. Ry-anne sniffed. Waiting, waiting. She mustn't sneeze whilst she was Paired.

After an age the doors opened again, shrieking like Kyna did when Andee stepped on her. Ry-anne bit down on her bottom lip. Was that him? Footsteps padded closer. More than one set. That meant another Priestess and her Pair! Ry-anne listened hard, but then called herself daft for trying to work out what he looked like just by his step. The waiting would be over soon.

Somebody stepped up next to her. Ry-anne glanced to her left, which was stupid, she thought afterwards, since the hood made the ceremony room seem blacker than sleep.

Other people were moving around. The Priestesses preparing the drink, no doubt—Ry-anne had been through the routine ten thousand times. Sure enough, goblets clinked against tables. There was the chug, chug, trickle of wine being poured, and Ry-anne thought she smelled the fruity tang of mulled berries. She sighed and shifted her weight to the other foot, dying just to ask this boy who he was.

Hands clapped. Startling. "Good, we are now ready to unveil you to each other. Are you both ready to receive your Pair? Please nod."

Ry-anne bowed her head, hearing cotton shift faintly as the person next to her did the same.

"Very well," said the Priestess. "Your veils will be removed simultaneously, and you will then be asked whether you will drink from the Goblet of Eternity. If you agree, the taking of wine from the same goblet signifies your oneness and the fact that you will be each other's strength, heart and wisdom for the remaining time you walk this fair land. Please nod if you understand."

Again, Ry-anne bowed her head and again heard the boy do the same. Nervous now, her heart pulsed quicker with each step the Priestesses took towards her. Finally, the hot hoods were whisked off.

Ry-anne sucked in a refreshing breath and her eyes instantly went to the spot the boy ought to be.

She had to tilt her head to look up, for the boy was much taller than she had expected. Then her jaw dropped. This tall person was not a boy! He was a man almost—even older than Gwyneth!

The goblet was presented first to the boy/man, who was frowning at her. Ry-anne realized that she was doing the same thing. But the boy was shaking his head. Not declining her, merely baffled, she thought. His lips parted.

"There may be no talking," interrupted the other Priestess, the one without the goblet.

The boy sighed. His sandy brows knitted tight and he shook his head one more time. Seeming to shrug, he took a sip from the goblet, and Ry-anne watched the pink-red liquid flow over his lips, before he swallowed it down.

Silently, the Priestess moved to Ry-anne. Her thoughts raced, a thousand thinkings a moment, but her confusion meant that none of those thoughts made sense. She was supposed to have gotten a playmate, someone close to her own age. Not an adult-type person who would tell on her for climbing trees or putting slugs in Kyna's pretty ringlets.

Then she realised something else. This boy/man was also a highborn! A direct descendent of the family that had founded Glandor, heir to the House, not an obscure relative as was she. Ry-anne vaguely remembered having seen him around the grounds and during festivals. But she had always been told to let him alone. His type would not have time for the likes of you, Immediates would say. At those moments Ry-anne would rally. She was also a member of the House and they were all Family, all equal, and each just as good as the other. What did it matter who she played with?

But now it did matter. And Ry-anne was unsure of herself. Wetting her lips and gulping nervously, Ry-anne took a sip from the goblet, which the Priestess had been patiently holding. The wine was tart and left a bitter aftertaste. She snatched a glance at the boy/man and he gave a quick, uncertain smile in return.

"Markooth of Glandor, heir to the House of Glandor, look on the face of Ry-anne, member of the House of Glandor. Remember it, know it, love it. You will walk this land as Pairs for ever onward, or as long as you both draw breath. And no matter who else you love or partner or birth with, always will there be someone at your side to guide you when the light grows dark, or to unburden you when the heart grows heavy, always will there be your Pair. Always will your Destinies be entwined."

Markooth of Glandor, Ry-anne said silently to herself. Mammy Gamine would be pleased. But the title gave her the shivers. A highborn. A yacky high born.

Ry-anne knew the Priestesses were smiling inwardly. They probably enjoyed these ceremonies, like the birthing ones. At least they didn't seem to think the Pairing was strange.

"Now we will leave you for a moment," said the Priestess solemnly. It was the one who had offered her the goblet—at least Ry-anne thought it was; dressed in those itchy dull robes and hoods, it was hard to tell. "Please become acquainted. Don't be alarmed that your Pairing seems unusual. The Fates have told us that it is right. And after, you will join your families in the meal hall and we shall celebrate this joyous occasion."

With that, the Priestesses shuffled out, the bony black soles of their feet thudding over the wood. The great double doors shrieked when they were opened, as though shocked, then cried mournfully until they clattered shut.

There was silence for two heartbeats and then Markooth cleared his throat. Ry-anne sniffed. Shifted her weight again and blew out her cheeks. Eventually, she licked her lips and looked up at him.

"Hi," she said.

He looked as if he had been concentrating on something else and was shocked to find her there. But there was a raised eyebrow and a half smile. "Hello."

Ry-anne looked down again. Chewed her lip. Scratched her nose.

"So…Ry-anne's a nice name."

"Yes it is. My birth Pappy gave it to me, you see."

"Ah."

A pause that stretched forever. Ry-anne knew it was her turn to speak. She thought up something quick. "Er…can you climb trees?"

The boy/man looked at her a while before his whole face grinned. He shook his head to himself. "Well yes, I can. Although I'm not supposed to."

Ry-anne snorted. "Huh. I just don't listen. I'm not s'posed to either, 'cos I'm a girl and I

have to hitch my robes up all unproper-like. So Mammy says, but sometimes I just take 'em off."

"Your robes?" Markooth looked disapproving.

Ry-anne did her best impression of Gwyneth and rolled her eyes. "Yeeee-eees. That's what I said wasn't it? Anyhow, last Warm Period I climbed the cider trees—you know the ones by the lake?" A nod. "Well I climbed them right to the very tip, so's I could jump into the water. My brothers bet me to, but then they snitched on me. You're not gonna snitch on me for climbing trees are you?" She craned her head up to see him.

"Ah…no."

Ry-anne nodded firmly and looked down again. "Good, cos we can't be friends if you're a snitcher. I don't care what this Pair tradition says."

"Fine. But you have to be careful. Those cider trees are slippery, you know."

Ry-anne gave him her 'indignant' look. "I know. I climbed 'em 'member?" She waited for a nod.

Markooth was a while in giving it. "Ah yes, that's right…so you did."

"You don't gotta talk to me like that, you know? I'm not a babby anymore—don't need reminding 'bout rules and stuff."

"How old are you, Ry-anne?"

Her name sounded funny when he said it. Soft like. Not, Ry-anne do this or Ry-anne get down from there. But Ry-anne, I really would be very interested to know how old you are. It sounded nice. "Twelve seasons."

"Are you?" His voice went high. Cracked a bit like boy/man's voices do. Gwyneth said Davvy's was cracking and would soon be Pappy deep. But Davvy got embarrassed about it, so it was best not to notice such things.

Ry-anne looked at Markooth. His bronzed skin was a little flushed and his golden eyes were bright even in the shadows of the ceremony room. And they were looking at her, full attention, which felt good. So she didn't tease him, like she would Geffray or Kall. "Nah, not really. I'm eight seasons."

Markooth nodded. The silence came again and Ry-anne started to make noises with her tongue, clicking and clacking, waiting for the Priestesses to come back. Her stomach gurgled, a reminder that nobody had bothered to give her breakfast. She hoped there would be cake in the meal hall.

"Are you hungry?" Markooth asked, obviously hearing her tummy.

"Mmhm. Mammy never gave me…"

The doors creaked open again and in came the Priestesses. They might actually be smiling, thought Ry-anne, although she couldn't be certain.

"We hope you got to know each other a little," said one. She was taller than the other and had a deep voice, a bit like a man's. Maybe she looked like one too, and that was why she hid under her hood, thought Ry-anne. "Please follow us to the meal hall. Your families are waiting to see you."

Ry-anne tutted. "The dirty liars! They said they never knew who we were gonna be Paired with!"

The Priestesses stopped in their tracks and she felt Markooth's curious stare, which made her want to huddle up and go small. Apparently, she'd done something wrong. Perhaps saying something that wasn't in the proper ceremony?

"May I remind you, child, that the ceremony has not yet ended, so please behave accordingly. Your families have only now found out that you were Paired when they were escorted to and met your respective Immediates in the meal room. Now please follow us."

Ry-anne prickled at being called a child in front of her new, nearly grown-up Pair. But she nodded. "Yes, your highness."

"Thought you didn't need reminding about rules," Markooth whispered, as she was about to walk off.

Ry-anne shot a look at the Priestesses disappearing backs. Why should he be able to get away with saying something? But they hadn't heard, so she settled on just scowling at him herself.

They walked in silence out of the ceremony room back towards the quad. The Priestesses walked ahead with Ry-anne and Markooth after. It was a bright morn, meaning that no evil threatened to usurp the Dimension today. Grateful, Ry-anne kissed her fist and pressed it to her chest. 'Hail Madrea, Grand of Glandor. Thank you for keeping my Pairing day safe.'

The sun pierced Ry-anne's eyes and warmed the air, encouraging the bushy Boeilehocks to release their fresh flowery scent. Markooth walked slightly ahead, but slowed up a touch when he noticed she was struggling to keep up with his long strides. That was annoying, so she sped up to go in front of him.

The meal hall was empty save for their Immediates, the close relatives from each of their families. The rest of the House had stayed clear today, the bells telling them that there was a Pairing in process. They would take breakfast in the old meal room this morn, to give the two families time to get to know each other.

Mammy Gamine gasped. "Sweet Grand!"

Pappy Mallun shushed her, but she could not seem to take her eyes off Markooth and muttered noisily.

"My but he is old, isn't he? Grand, I'd forgotten just how old Sir Kelthro's boy was. Isn't he old, Johann? How old do you think he is? Fifteen?"

It was a long walk through the tables, towards the two separate groups of standing families. They were waiting. Ry-anne began to feel uncomfortable. Markooth's group of Immediates was only half the size of Ry-anne's, and there only seemed to be one Pappy and two Mammies. That was a bit strange. And they were staring at her like big scary adults did when you'd not come to meals when the bells told you to, or you'd traipsed muck into the House.

Ry-anne fidgeted under their heavy gaze. For some reason, she did not want to look at Markooth now. Did not want to even be near him. Eventually they reached their families.

"Congratulations, all. The Fates have not failed us. This Pairing will remain strong for many seasons to come. Congratulations," the taller Priestess said in the hushed way that Priestesses spoke. The smaller one just bowed shyly, smiling humbly before moving aside.

"Mm, yes," Mammy Gamine said. Pappy Johann took over and thanked them for all they had done. But he wasn't smiling his usual big smile either.

Suddenly, Ry-anne felt lost. She wanted Pappy Johann's hand but didn't dare go and take it. She was supposed to go over and say hello to her Pair's Immediates, but nobody seemed bothered about what she was doing. Markooth went over and took hands and said hello to her Mammies and Pappies, like she should have been. But somehow she was rooted to that very spot.

Kyna leaned back against Pappy Jenn, twisting long curls and staring up at the ceiling.

All her brothers stood stiffly, bored and uncomfortable in their black special robes. Only Gwyneth seemed interested. In fact, her eyes were wide and sparkling, following Markooth's huge lanky frame as he moved about, repeating his polite, "Hello, nice to meet you. I'm Markooth. Hello, nice to meet you…"

Ry-anne went over and grabbed Gwyneth's hand. Gwyneth shook it free.

"Ry-anne, don't be such a babby and go say hello."

"Can't. They don't like me."

"Nobody likes you, sister. But that's just 'cos you smell. Don't worry though, I'm sure they'll be too polite to mention anything."

Ry-anne huffed and turned her back on Gwyneth, who was eagerly waiting her turn to meet Markooth. Gwyneth ran a hand through her perfect hair and smoothed her robe. Ry-anne folded her arms and sulked. Mammy Gamine was going to tell her off for it soon, but she didn't care.

"Hello, nice to meet you. I'm Markooth."

"Why Markooth, it's so nice to meet you—I'm Gwyneth, Ry-anne's oldest sister. It's so nice to meet you. Can I get you something to eat—a drink perhaps? There's plenty."

Facing away from Gwyneth, Ry-anne felt that she could scowl safely. But she looked up and bumped eyes with Markooth. She glanced away quickly, ignoring him.

"Markooth? It would be no trouble honestly. You must be quite famished as I'm sure you didn't get chance to take breakfast this morn." She giggled.

Ry-anne shook her head. Gwyneth's giggle drove her mad. It was as stupid and useless as she was.

"No, thank you. But it was kind of you to ask. I shall eat later. Perhaps I could get you something?"

"Me? No, I'm just fine." Another pointless giggle. "Besides, this is your day. You're the one who should be waited on."

Ry-anne groaned. Mammy Gamine pinched her arm.

"Ow!"

"I never expect to be waited on," Markooth said. Ry-anne felt him looking at her. Too many people were looking at her. Unfortunately, Mammy Gamine was one of them.

"Oh what now?" Ry-anne moaned, which made Mammy Gamine tilt her head to the side. Her eyes bugged out even further. It was a warning—don't you embarrass me in front of the heirs to the House, young lady.

Ry-anne tutted. Discreetly. Her face grew hot.

"Ry-anne?" That soft voice again. Markooth. She looked up and he held out his hand. "Come on, do you want to meet my Immediates? I would bet they are bursting to meet you."

Really? Wondered Ry-anne. He held out his hand for her and Ry-anne looked at it with a wrinkled nose. Gwyneth was trying to pretend she wasn't annoyed. So Ry-anne took Markooth's hand, hoping that might annoy Gwyneth further.

She felt proud being led by her new Pair. But pride soon turned to fear when faced with his foreboding group of Immediates.

"Mother, Father, Mother Josephine, I'd like you to meet Ry-anne. My…my Pair."

"Mother" must have been Markooth's birth mother, Ry-anne surmised. That would be the one she'd need to like her the most then.

"Hallo Ry-anne. I'm Cate, it's very nice to meet you." Cate was beautiful. Her shoulder length hair fell in honey waves, darker than Markooth's. She smiled at Ry-anne, but the smile wobbled. She cleared her throat and looked away, which made Ry-anne feel funny.

"Father?" Markooth said.

"Ah, yes," answered the tall, stiff man. This was obviously where Markooth got his height from. "How do you do?" His hand was sweaty as he loosely shook Ry-anne's free hand. Markooth still held the other. He let go too quickly and didn't make eye contact again. Ry-anne felt Markooth bristle. She turned her head to look up at him, and he smiled tensely. Ry-anne surreptitiously wiped the man's hand-sweat off on her robe.

"And this is Josephine," said Markooth, gesturing.

Josephine was smaller than the other two and plump like Mammy. Well, not as plump as Mammy. Her grey hair was the color of iron, but her eyes were kind and creased with laughter lines.

"Well now, little one. Don't you look a picture in that lovely robe?"

That dragged a little smile out. She offered her own hand impulsively. "Pleased to meet you, Josephine."

Josephine looked surprised, but must not have been offended because she took Ry-anne's hand, clasped her other one over it and shook warmly. "The pleasure is all mine, my dear. You mustn't be afraid to visit us whenever you want."

"I won't. Thank you."

Markooth, still holding her hand, drew her towards the last person in the group. "Ry-anne, this is my brother Lefus."

Ry-anne couldn't imagine having a brother so old that he looked like a Pappy. And something about him made her nervous. He was dark-haired like Josephine, so he must have been her and Markooth's father's babby. But he had not inherited any of Josephine's warmth and good nature.

"Good to meet you, Ry-anne," he said slowly and carefully, in such a way that it was clear he wasn't pleased to meet her at all.

"Mmhm." Mammy would kill her for replying that way.

Markooth seemed uncomfortable—in fact, everybody seemed uncomfortable.

"I'm sure you and my baby brother here will have a lot of fun together. Isn't that right, Marky?"

There seemed a collective intake of breath from all the adults. All eyes darted to Ry-anne, which made her wonder what the Grand she had done. She looked to Markooth—his face was heated. Lefus was staring at him, waiting for a reply, but Markooth didn't seem as though he was going to give one. They two brothers glared at each other, and Ry-anne started to feel afraid. Markooth let go of her hand and she suddenly felt lost.

"Well now," Josephine piped up. "I believe it's time to break bread, don't you think? I don't know about you all but I'm famished—then again, I always am!" Her chins shook with laughter and the mood eased.

Ry-anne felt Pappy Johann's mental touch. A reassurance. It made her feel better and gave her the confidence to last throughout the rest of the day. Lefus did not stay for the meal, which seemed to irritate his father. But Ry-anne relaxed a little once he had gone. At the end of the meal, the two groups of Immediates parted with awkward goodbyes and false congratulations.

"I will see you next aft, when schoolroom is over," Markooth said, in front of his waiting family who seemed very ready to leave.

Ry-anne shrugged and could not quite meet his golden eyes. "Sure. Whatever. I don't mind."

A pause. "Well, goodbye then."

"Bye."

Ry-anne was half glad when Markooth had gone, because everyone seemed to relax. Still, they all walked back to the East Wing in silence, only interrupted occasionally by stilted murmurs from the Pappies. Even Andee kept quiet.

THREE

"Enter."

The Priestess stepped into the Grand's darkened room. The aged lady turned from the window where she sat most morns and eves. "O gracious Grand," said the Priestess, bowing her head solemnly. The power in this room, or just in the Grand's presence, always overwhelmed Lyelle. "You do me a great honor in allowing this visit."

The Grand smiled. Her sad face softened and beauty shone through the creases of age. For a moment, Madrea was there. "Ah, Lyelle. Appointments are not necessary between us, you silly fool. Neither are such elegant words."

Lyelle bowed again, less deep. "As you wish, great Grand." She could not bring herself to call this woman Madrea, friend, or even sister any longer. For the Grand was far more than the sum of those parts. More than anybody could comprehend. And she was no longer a woman either; she was Ruler.

Lyelle gazed fondly at Madrea, but felt her retreat. Relationships, love—even family were impossibilities in her situation. Madrea sat up straighter in the chair and cleared her throat. Lyelle suddenly found herself standing before the Grand of Glandor.

"With what can I help you, O bothersome Priestess?"

Lyelle allowed herself a smile. She pushed her hands into long sleeves and rested them there. "I am troubled. Today's Pairing has worried the Family, especially the Immediates of the newly created Pair."

"Yes, I feel it." The Grand turned in her chair, which let out a creak, and gazed out of the window once again. The gentle morn light caressed her tired face, teasing it into life. Lyelle watched her pale eyes flicker as they followed various people going about their business.

"Do you think we ought to consult the Fates again?"

The Grand locked eyes with Lyelle. Fire leapt. Determination shone. "Out of the question! The Fates are not wrong;, Destiny places these two children together and the girl, she will need him. No, their Destinies are entwined. This is how it is written, Priestess. This is how it was foretold. There is no other way."

"You are right of course, great Grand. But there is much unsettlement amongst the Family. Whatever age the Pairing is done, the two are always of similar Seasons. The Family worries about the boy being at a different stage in his life than the girl. They feel that it will be impossible for them to become close for this reason. The girl's Immediates even worry for her safety."

The Grand's face contorted passionately. "What stuff and nonsense! Markooth is a noble boy, his soul is strong and his morals befitting that of an heir to the House. Which is more than I can say for that brother of his, Lefus. Hmph."

Lyelle suppressed a chuckle. There would always be some of Madrea inside their Ruler. Lyelle just wished that she saw her more often.

"Moreover, the fact that the Family feels this way towards the Pair will only serve to bring them closer. And that, good Priestess, is very necessary. Time will show the Fates right in this decision."

"I do not question the Fates. Only, it is my duty to bring the feelings of the Family to your

attention. They suspect this relationship is doomed from its commencement, and that causes them great distress—as you can imagine."

"Perhaps it is." Very quietly.

"Great Grand?"

"Thank you, Priestess. I do feel the Family's pain."

Lyelle bowed. "Yes, of course. You have reassured me with your reasoning, and in turn, I will endeavor to reassure the Family."

The Grand nodded faintly and turned back to the window. "The boy reminds me of my own love. The same good heart. Which is why it is so hard to do what we must. Ah, Onigh, we shall meet again soon I am sure. My time on this plane grows short."

Lyelle approached the window and stood next to the Grand. She could not take her hand and squeeze, nor could she kiss her with a reassuring mental touch, but she hoped that her presence was some comfort. "Onigh was a brave soul," said Lyelle.

A contemplative silence. The Grand leaned forward in the complaining chair. Lyelle saw that her eyes were on two babbies play fighting, each intent on throwing the most grass on the other. Mammies and Pappies stood by, watching indulgently and warm with love for their children. Lyelle felt the ache in Madrea. She had always said how much she wanted children of her own. From a babby, she had played with dollies and fed and clothed them and asked for an extra place to be set for her dolly babby at mealtimes. At sixty Seasons, she would never now get to be mother of her own child and must be content with being Mother to the land of Glandor. But was it enough?

"See that sky, Lyelle?" said the Grand, still staring out.

"It is certainly a beautiful day. You should go out and enjoy it."

"Oh I enjoy it from in here. In my own way. Besides, too much sun is not good for one's complexion, don't you know?" Lyelle chuckled. The Grand scratched her cheek and sniffed, the casual action seeming to make her human again, to make her Madrea. "Beyond the beauty of the day, beyond the blue and the warm and the serenity of the morn, lurks a fierce storm that threatens havoc and complete devastation."

The Grand had returned. "What storm is this, O Grand?"

"Evil, Lyelle. Old, dark…mythical. The Dimensions will start to blur and Glandor will no longer be this separate paradise. And I will soon be too weak to defend Her. Yes, I may live longer than I propose to, but that would be of no use. The evil will soon be upon us, and Glandor deserves the best armor that we can provide Her with. We must inform the child and start the training as soon as possible."

"I agree," said Lyelle, though it cut her to be talking about her own sister's death so matter-of-factly.

"But not just yet. Leave them time to bond." A sigh. "They are going to need each other's strength these coming Seasons."

* * *

Schoolroom was weird for Ry-anne. Whispers. Looks. Curiosity. Her back crawled under the pressure of a dozen eyes. What did they want? She scowled to herself and cuddled her arm over her work—a spell test. Everybody always copied off her during magic tests. Well

not today—not when they were all being so nasty. Clouds traveled, revealing the boiling sun. Lemony sunlight slanted through the window, illuminating Ry-anne and making the ends of her hair seem as though it truly was on fire. She scowled deeper. Why did her desk always get the sunlight? It was making her hot and itchy.

Why What—I don't know—do you think—Could be—I don't—But why?—Paired with a highborn—and so much older—

Shuddup, lazy horses! Ry-anne threw out. Her classmates' mental conversations were raucous and she couldn't concentrate on her test. Time would soon be up, and Ry-anne hadn't finished. Her outburst shocked the class and was tinged with annoying amusement. The noise died down for a heartbeat but then doubled in intensity. Ry-anne groaned, but then she felt Maid Faronnen –Fatbottom, their mistress—push into the thick of it. Her formidable presence made all the other minds scatter.

Quiet during the test children!

Grateful, Ry-anne thanked nice Fatbottom with a smile before returning to the paper. Finally, she could concentrate. She had actually finished the test and written down all the materials needed to make a Good Health spell, but she wanted to make sure the spell would last longer than one measly eve. After all, what was the point of going to all the trouble finding a rose wart if the spell didn't last? That just didn't make sense. Now, what herb did you crush with Kati'ya to extend a health spell again? She wondered.

"Alright girls, time's up!"

Ry-anne pulled a face and reluctantly set her scriber down on the desk. Fatbottom edged around the desks to collect the test papers and stacked them on her table, before sitting behind it. Folding her hands, she said, "A few questions."

There was a flush of mental and verbal groans.

Ignoring them, Fatbottom went on. "Why must we always be grateful to the Grand for a clear sky?"

Not me, not me, Ry-anne prayed as Fatbottom perused the bowed heads for somebody to pick on.

"Ry-anne."

She chewed her bottom lip. "Ah…because…because it means the Grand is doing what she's supposed to?" Fatbottom's arched eyebrow made her cringe. The class snickered.

"Ye-es," Fatbottom began. "But why, specifically, does a clear sky mean the Grand is 'doing what she's supposed to?'"

Ry-anne swallowed. "Because she's keeping away the evil."

"And what might the evil do if the Grand didn't keep it away?"

"It could take over Glandor?"

"That's right." Ry-anne relaxed somewhat. But it wasn't yet over. "And why do you think the evil might want to take over our Dimension?"

"It wants a bigger home?"

Fatbottom tried to hide a smile then. "Of sorts, yes. Evil," she said, addressing the whole class now in a clear voice, "is all around our small Dimension. And all around us there are many more Dimensions, all constantly competing for space. Some, like us, are content with the space they have fought for. Some are not and, being greedy, they cannot resist the idea of conquering neighboring Dimensions.

"Now evil comes in many forms, from nasty demons, to violence, and even disease. And as I'm sure you children all know, the Glandors have always worked to keep this world a place that is free from danger, harm and pestilence. And how is this done, Ry-anne? Do you have any examples?"

"Uh…well we—we practice white magic to—to uh, create Good Health spells—like the one we've just done."

"Good. It is very important to know what motivates our actions. We study and practice the ways of magic to keep us healthy. And what else?"

Ry-anne licked her lips. "We have," she lowered her voice, "we have Pairs to keep us happy."

A held-in laugh now snorted out.

"Pipe down, Gerty, that's quite enough—and you're right Ry-anne, we have a complex social structure of Family, Pairs, partners and friends. All of which keep us emotionally satiated in varying, yet fundamental ways."

"What's fund-a-mental, Maid Faronnen?"

"Good question, Olah. It means basic. Now can anybody think of another way—the most important way—that Glandor is kept secure? No?…Nobody?…What about you, Ry-anne?"

Ry-anne squirmed in her seat. "The Grand."

"The Grand!" Fatbottom pointed at Ry-anne. "Exactly. You see you're all part of a very important process. From villagers to Family, we all help to make the Grand's job—and thus our lives—that little bit easier. Without the villagers to provide food and entertainment, the Family would not have strength enough to weave our magic. Subsequently, if we did not ensure that our people and the inside of our Dimension was happy and healthy, then the Grand would not have time to see that the outside was clear of any evil that might darken our sky. That, girls, is why we must always be grateful to the Grand for a clear sky."

Just then, the bells rang off in the quad and chairs were immediately scraped back.

"Ah! Sit back down!" said Fatbottom.

Everybody sat down again sharply. Ry-anne made a display of rolling her eyes. They waited.

"Now you can go." Chair legs squeaked against the wooden floor. Things were grabbed up. "And don't…" The class sped out of the room, jostling and all trying to squeeze through the small door at the same time. "…Run."

Ry-anne was last out, not wanting to remind her classmates about herself or her new Pair. Luckily, they were all in too much of a hurry to get out and go swimming or play cartwheels on the grass.

Markooth was waiting. He stood away from the schoolhouse, the sun shining on his fair hair and making it look like soft, fine sand. Ry-anne hung her head briefly. The kids were all pointing at him, and Ry-anne knew he was pretending not to notice. He squinted when he saw her, the noonday sun in his eyes. With a sigh, Ry-anne trudged up the small incline to where he was standing and, without a word to each other, they walked away.

Mental whispers buzzed loudly in their wake. Ry-anne gritted her teeth and blocked. In silence, they walked through the House grounds, no real direction in mind. Every so often, people would twist and stare. Ry-anne heard Markooth wonder about where they should go. Anywhere private would cause more trouble, he thought. Ry-anne did not know why that was but sensed he

was right. They had to go somewhere open, but that meant people and people meant gossip. Ry-anne didn't know why that was either.

So they settled on the rose garden, a small section of the park where there stood a statue of the current Grand. Only ancients visited the old parks, which housed effigies to previous Grand's. There were lots of people already there. Mammies and Pappies that had met their young ones after schoolroom and come for a snack before prayers and evening meal. Others fed the ducks in the pond and played catch-the-ball with their babbies and enjoyed the brilliant day. Some shushed their babbies from talking about Ry-anne and Markooth, only to tittle-tattle mentally between themselves.

"Did you have a good day in the schoolroom?"

Ry-anne sent him a look. He sounded like a Pappy. They sat down on the steps before the statue and Ry-anne drew up her knees, making sure her robe was tucked in all around so nobody could peak up it. Funny, she'd never bothered about things like that before. She wiped her nose with her knuckles and then leaned her elbows on her knees and her chin on her fists. The hot sun warmed her hair and seared the bare skin of her shoulders.

Markooth sat uncomfortably on the stone. Perhaps he could pick up more whispers. He'd be more adept at it, being so much older. Ry-anne yawned without covering her mouth and looked around, ignoring the pointing fingers that were slapped down by righteous parents, who were behaving no better than their babbies but were just less obvious about it. She took in the marble statue of the Grand. It was all the people of Glandor really had to remind them of their protector. Madrea was her name—Ry-anne knew that much—but she was very private. Ry-anne bit her bottom lip as she stared at the graceful marble statue of a young woman, the most powerful in the whole Dimension. She thought it must be nice to have nobody telling you what to do and to be allowed to stay indoors forever, where you couldn't see the people who were whispering about you.

"This is boring," she said.

Markooth looked at her. A small, warm smile. "So what would you prefer to do?"

Ry-anne shrugged. "Something funner than this."

"We could go and see my house. My father keeps horses. I have a dappled grey filly called, well, she's called Grey. You could ride her if you like."

Ry-anne's heart leaped. Now that would be fun. But she didn't want to let Markooth know how excited it made her. In a Wing full of selfish brothers and sisters, you never let on how much you adored something. More often than not, those brothers and sisters would then adore that something even more. Instead she said, "You have your own house? A house away from the House? Why?"

Markooth said something about his house not being far from the main House at all. But Ry-anne was thinking about more important things. Yes, there were horses in the paddock, but not one to call her very own. Jealousy stabbed. Why should Markooth have his own horse if she wasn't allowed one? It was only the desire to ride the filly that kept her quiet.

"Actually, we're still part of the House, even though we're slightly away from it. Father likes his privacy." Markooth seemed a little embarrassed by the high stature of his Immediates. Good.

"Oh right. Well come on then, let's go."

They stood and Ry-anne smoothed down her robe. Thank the Grand it was a schoolroom

day so she could wear her cotton robe. It was way too sticky for the silks.

"It's a looong way to your house," Ry-anne panted after they had walked out of the rose garden, past the lake and the stables that housed the municipal horses and past the huge, sprawling building of the very House itself. She wondered how much it had been added and added to over the years.

"What? Afraid you won't make it?"

Ry-anne squinted up at him sharply. It was a challenge. "I could beat you to it any morn—if I knew where it was."

"See that row of spruces up there, just beyond the conifers? My house is behind all that. First one to the trees grins, last one gets kicked in the shins."

"Promise I won't kick you too hard," Ry-anne said, fingers secretly crossed behind her back.

"Are you set?" They both had one foot in front of the other, heads down, ready. "Go!"

Markooth blasted off, chucking up sand and pebbles in his wake. His long legs let him sail easily over the distance. She watched the sinews in his legs ripple. Ry-anne dug deep, clutching up her long robe with one hand. She pounded after him, cursing the fact that boy's wraps were much shorter than girls' robes. She could not seem to go fast enough! It was too embarrassing to be beaten by a boy—she could not let that happen! She strove harder, harder still, till the air cut her throat, chapping her lungs as she sucked it in.

Markooth was going to — he won! Ry-anne watched through a blur as he eased to a stop, vanishing through the spruces. When he reappeared, hands on hips and controlling his heavy breathing, Ry-anne just reached the trees, sandals clattering to a stop.

He grinned. "You're really fast for a girl."

Ry-anne bent over, hands on her knees. Her lungs felt burned out and every breath she took made them hurt. She was going to be sick. "Shut…up," she said between breaths.

"Here, come on through…out of the sun."

Markooth guided her through the row of trees and out the other side, so that she could stand in the shade. The air was still roasting, but definitely cooler. Even so, each breath seemed to tear scabs through her insides and she knew she couldn't—it hurt too—oh Great Grand…

She was sick.

Mainly liquid slapped the sand. Markooth dodged out of the way, uttering a curse. Ry-anne closed her eyes and groaned, feeling worse than ever. It might be good to die right now, she thought. Just then, a man crossed their path. It was Lefus. As Ry-anne wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, she felt both herself and Markooth tense up. Lefus was stripped to the waist, skin glistening like oil in the hot sun, carrying blocks of wood cradled by his left arm and a malicious looking axe over his right shoulder. His black hair was wet with sweat and he frowned when he saw them. His dark eyes seemed to glint at the same time his axe's blade winked in the brilliant sunlight.

He stopped and turned. A smirk sneaked up on his angular face. "I see my Halfie's made you unwell already."

Ry-anne slid a glance at Markooth. He glared at his brother. "Leave us, Lefus."

Lefus beamed, maddeningly cheerful. "Soon he shall be doing other things to you that will make you sick." He stopped, frowned. "Or maybe you'll enjoy them. Yes, you look the sort."

Ry-anne felt fire engulf Markooth. She looked again, but he stood calm, only the muscle

tensing in his jaw giving away his real state of mind. Puzzled, Ry-anne was going to ask what these 'things' were, but Markooth must have felt her intentions and stopped her with a sharp mental shush.

Lefus laughed, deep, guttural laughter.

"Come on," Markooth said out loud, his face was sunset-red. "You must be thirsty."

They walked away from Lefus towards a large and impressive building that Ry-anne had been too sick to notice before, Lefus' sharp black eyes watching them until they were out of sight. Only then could she relax.

It was cool inside the house, all marble and polished wood. At other times she would have been spiteful to Markooth for having such nice chambers—with varnished doors and all—but she was just grateful to be out of the heat and away from his brother.

Markooth's high color faded slowly, but his anger had completely vanished. Ry-anne sat on a stool by the main table and watched him walk about the room, where they were allowed to keep mealtime things, and fix her a cup of fruit juice. He handed it to her before pouring himself one.

"Better sip it," he said with his back to her, as he poured his drink. Juice glugged out of the jug and whooshed into the beaker. "If you rush it down, I'll warrant you'll be ill again."

Ry-anne sipped the chilled juice, which quieted the roaring pain in her chest. Markooth came over to sit beside her but moved to sit opposite instead.

"Do I smell? If you have water I can wash."

Markooth looked dumbfounded a moment, but then he grinned. "No, you're fine."

Ry-anne nodded and inhaled deeply. She felt better now that breathing no longer caused such pain. "Thank you for the drink."

"Not at all." Markooth took a few swallows of his own drink. The only other thing Ry-anne could hear was the recurrent chirrup of Jirra birds and Lefus' disturbing chop-chop-chop as he cut up more trees.

"May I ride your horse now?"

"Are you able?"

Ry-anne nodded eagerly. "I just love horses."

"I'd have thought you would not yet be well enough." Markooth looked impressed.

"I'm fine." They finished their drinks before going around the back of the house to the stables.

The barn was quiet and brooding, like the both of them. Ry-anne lay back on a bale of hay, tickling the top of her lip with one straw. Markooth was at her side as always. But this eve he seemed restless.

Ry-anne twisted on her side to look at him better. The hay whispered as she did so, some of it stabbing her back and making her itch. She scratched her hip absently. The cows were snoring and Markooth was so still that he could have been asleep himself. The enticing aroma of honey spice, Markooth's favored scent, drifted towards her nostrils. Ry-anne inhaled deeply. A warm glow from the candle lamp gently illuminated his handsome face, and Ry-anne could see that his golden eyes were thoughtful and unblinking.

"You are thinking of The Rise aren't you?" Ry-anne said. It was not really a question, because Ry-anne thought she knew everything about Markooth. After all, they had been Paired

so long.

Markooth would not look her way. But he spoke softly. “You ought to be preparing, you know.”

Ry-anne blinked. She felt dizzy. “What did you say?”

Markooth frowned. “I did not speak. Are you unwell? Would you like me to take you back to the House, you look rather…”

Ry-anne teetered. Words blurred and sounds muted. She passed out. The hay whispered as she fell to the ground, some of it stabbing her back and making her itch.

FOUR

"What were you doing to her?" Lefus asked.

"What?" Markooth stared at him.

Cate and Kelthro exchanged glances. "Enough of this," Kelthro ordered. "Lefus, this situation is unhappy enough without you irritating it further."

Markooth stood in the meal room of his own house before the rest of his Immediates, who were seated all around him. Kelthro had taken Ry-anne home in the cart, and he had not returned in the best of moods.

The only other person standing was Lefus. He prowled like an aggravated lion, his expression annoyed at being told what to do. Markooth could tell he was about to lash out when Josephine intervened. "Sweetheart," she said. "Why not make us up a nice jug of fern tea?"

Lefus looked at her as though she were quite mad but stalked off nevertheless.

"Thank you, Josephine," Cate said, riling Markooth this time. Mother always spoke to Josephine as though she was a village servant come to dust the house. But Josephine merely nodded, humble as always, and gave Markooth a quick wink of encouragement.

"So I shall ask again, Markooth. What were you and the girl doing in the barn?"

Her name is Ry-anne, Markooth wanted to say. But he wouldn't. Instead, he sighed and repeated himself. "I told you, Father, we went to see the horses. We had just gone inside when Ry-anne went all…I don't know, wobbly. She fell over. It is my fault—I should not have raced with her. She was probably unwell from the sun and the exertion—I should have taken her home right then."

"You should not have brought her here in the first place," Kelthro said.

"But she is my Pair." Markooth shrugged. "And whilst nobody might like it, Pairings are for the Fates to decide and we cannot argue with that. I have to get to know her."

"Well not anymore."

"What?"

Glowering eyes met Markooth's.

He corrected himself. "H-how do you mean, sir?"

"Your mother and I are going to contest the Pairing."

Markooth tried to decide whether he had heard right. He glanced at his mother, but she just looked away and grasped Kelthro's huge arm for comfort. Only Josephine's unusually sad eyes met his square on. Markooth wondered momentarily whether his mother and father had even bothered to tell her of their decision.

"You…" Markooth began, but Kelthro's level gaze was challenging—and downright provoking. Markooth wanted to back down as usual, wanted to bow his head and nod meekly. But he couldn't—not this time. His father must not interfere with this part of his life.

"Are you trying to say something, boy?"

Markooth's throat went dry. He swallowed, but that did not help much at all. He glanced at Josephine. She looked sympathetic but powerless to help. Mother stared at their lovely flooring, probably thinking that it needed polishing.

"Well?"

Markooth shook his head, and Kelthro smiled smugly, obviously believing that his son had

acquiesced.

"You cannot do this."

"Pardon?"

"I hope I don't hear you disagreeing with your Father, Marky," mother said.

Josephine looked scared. "Ah, Kelthro, I think what Markooth means to say is that…you know…it is not for us to interfere in these matters. Destiny decides Pairs, not parents—no matter how much we might wish that wasn't so…"

"Silence woman." Kelthro raised from the chair and became his full height, Cate's hands slipped away from his arm like cobwebs breaking. Markooth wet his lips and swallowed again. His breathing felt wrong. He watched his father's black nose hairs flutter in and out and felt the angry breath from his nose.

"Kelthro," Josephine pleaded. He ignored her.

Just then Lefus reentered the room, carrying a jug of fern tea. He set it down on a low table and rubbed his hands together, eyes bright. "So, what did I miss?"

"Out!" Kelthro gestured with his thumb. There was no questioning him. So why must I have to question him over this? Markooth wondered, abruptly wishing he could suck back his words. But it could not be, so instead he braced himself for what was coming. Lefus raised an eyebrow and glanced from Kelthro to Markooth. Lefus wisely removed himself from harm's way.

Kelthro returned his attentions to Markooth. One thick forefinger was pointed at him and Kelthro down the barrel of it. His nails were dirty, his father having worked in the garden all day.

"One last chance," he said carefully, "to retract your insubordinate words and agree with me over this…this child. Then we shall speak no more of it."

Markooth's underarms were damp. "I…" He shook his head. "No. She's a good soul and I—I like her. I won't give you my consent to do this." His dry voice ran out on the last word.

"Then I need to teach you a lesson about respect."

A fist exploded into his cheekbone. The initial numbness was shocking but then the pain blew up and spurted throughout his body. He gritted his teeth, trying to stifle a yell. Couldn't. The pain drained everything from him.

It was Josephine who tended to Markooth afterwards, who crept secretly into his room when everyone else was asleep and whispered apologies when her damp cloth hurt a delicate spot. Mother Cate could not do it, because she was afraid of blood.

* * *

That morn the bells woke Markooth just after dawn. But as soon as he opened his eyes he wanted to close them again. A heavy feeling of dread weighed him down, but he struggled up through the aches and pains and gingerly wrapped his short robe around himself. He reached for the bloodied garment he had discarded last night, but it was not there. He smiled faintly; Josephine must have taken it away to wash it.

It was fencing class at the schoolroom that morn, so Markooth decided to skip it. He did not want the embarrassment of having to explain away his bruises—again. Instead, he wandered into the meal room and grabbed a stick of bread and a chunk of mild cheese and stuffed them into a small sack. Everything was quiet. He held his breath, hoping that he wouldn't bump into

anyone, but then he heard a gentle sound. Somebody was humming. A nursery song.

"Mother? Is that you?"

The sound stopped. Markooth strained his hearing and pivoted around, his bare feet squeaking against the marble. The humming began again. A brief snatch, flying past his ear and then vanishing to nothing. He frowned, listened longer, harder. Nothing. With a shake of his head, he made his way out of the house and grounds, heading towards the lake.

Once he reached the lake, it was obvious that he had not been the only one with the idea of skipping studies. Kids splashed each other, screaming when their Pair or friend soaked them.

"I'll get you back!" one lad promised, and waded through the water, cupping his hands as he chased after a giggling girl. The sun often shone in Glandor throughout the Season, but today it was fierce, stabbing at his bare shoulders and making him thirst to get cool in the water.

Some kids sat on the banks, one playing a lute whilst his Immediates and friends sang a well-known folk song.

On the banks of the river Glandor
Ne'er has there been a site much grander…

One of the girls was coolly blonde and beautiful, leaning back against a tree stump with her robe hitched up to brown her pale legs. They would go red, Markooth thought, and never golden. Then he realized, there was something familiar about her.

"Markooth!" she called, noticing him. Sitting up, she beckoned him over vigorously. Her trio of friends all turned. Even the one playing the lute stopped. In fact, most people were staring.

Markooth braced himself and stepped forward, walking around to the back of the oval shaped lake.

"It is Gwyneth, yes?" he said, recognizing her once he got up close, hovering uncomfortably for there was no space to sit down. Cake and fruit was scattered all around.

"Mmhm—oh sweet Grand what happened to your face? It looks ever so sore!"

Markooth tried to shrug casually. "My fight mentals need some work. I flew right into my partner's fists. He's very sorry of course—but not sorrier than me." He touched his cheek and grimaced. The girls chuckled, but the boy who was playing the lute caught his eye, somehow sensing the truth.

"Markooth, meet Davvy, my Pair," said Gwyneth.

The boy offered his hand and grasped Markooth's warmly. "Good to meet you, Markooth." Davvy was brown-haired, with lots of freckles.

Kids splashed. A light-hearted scream. "I'll get you back!" Then there was whooshing as someone struggled to catch and another struggled to get away.

"And this is Glenna and Jino," Gwyneth said, "my schoolroom friends."

Glenna smiled shyly, whilst Jino avoided his eyes altogether. The curse of being blessed with being heir to the House, thought Markooth. He had no close friends, having brushed most away when he realized they did not want his friendship, only the privileges he could offer them. And now he had a Pair and yet he was still lonely.

"Good to make your acquaintance," he said to the two girls.

"And everybody, this is Markooth, my little sister's Pair."

The girls' eyes widened and this time they did look at him. Gaped in fact. Davvy simply continued to strum his battered old lute and pretended to be oblivious. Markooth sighed and offered another smile. Gwyneth looked apologetic.

"How is Ry-anne? I hope she is well."

Gwyneth's gaze skittered away. Finally, she dragged her eyes to his. "Perhaps you ought to visit with her."

Markooth frowned. "Why? What is wrong?"

Gwyneth looked pained. "Well, she…" she glanced at her intrigued school friends. "I don't know. She had a…well, she had a bad night."

Silence. Giggling tickled the air about him. Markooth flinched as deliciously cool water splashed his hot back. "I see. Well I must be off. I have some, ah, chores to do."

"The Heir to the House still has to do chores?" Shy Glenna was incredulous.

Markooth forced a laugh and a nod. "It was nice to meet you all. Davvy, Gwyneth." He bowed his head to each of them and left with a smile.

"Our Immediates live in the East wing of the House," Gwyneth called after him. "At the far back."

He twisted and gave a wave as thanks.

The whispers started as he walked away from the happy scene, and their eyes on him burned more cruelly than the sweltering sun. He tried to keep his head high and not feel awkward and clumsy as he walked away. He caught his breath around the back of the oily cider trees and thought about his new Pair. Sweet Grand, his Father might actually kill him if he found out that he had visited her. But he couldn't not go, not now that Gwyneth had told him she was unwell. His stomach churned as he wondered what could be wrong and how he would be received by her Immediates.

With a sigh, Markooth set off through the grounds and towards the East wing entrance. He chewed on some of the bread—which had annoying little seeds in it—and took a bite of the cheese, which had grown warm even in the cool, dark sack. But he found that he had no real appetite and tucked it all away once more.

People stared as he walked, but then people did that anyway. Either that or they pretended not to see him at all. And today they would have more to stare at given his battered face. A sick feeling twisted his insides. Great Grand, he hoped they didn't think…no. People wouldn't think Ry-anne could have done this to him, fighting him off. Fighting him off what? Great Grand! He had nothing to be ashamed of!

It was cool inside the House. The East Wing wasn't as well kept as the rest of the place, and Markooth felt a sting of guilt. He had never had cause to travel to this section before and was surprised to find the faded wood unvarnished and the rugs in need of repair. He scratched the side of his head, slightly damp with sweat, and he wiped his hand on the seat of his wrapped robe, realizing only then how wet both his hands were. Nerves.

A woman came out of one of the doors to Markooth's left, obliterating the light from the slat window at the end of the hall. He fished his memory; this must be Gamine.

"Maid, may I speak with you a moment?"

The woman was carrying a bowl with cloths inside and vials of medicine that clinked as she moved. Markooth saw the confliction on her face. On the one hand he was the Heir to the House, but on the other, he was that boy who was far too old to be her babby's Pair.

"What…what can I do for you, young sir?"

Markooth shifted his weight. "Well I should—I should like to see Ry-anne—if I may." He was going to say that Gwyneth had told him she was unwell, but caught himself. Gamine was probably not aware that she was skipping schoolroom. "I heard she was sickly."

The woman looked suspicious. Her eyes seemed to have the power to bore right through his clothing, making him feel even more uncomfortable. "What happened to your face?" she said at length.

"A clumsy accident with my sparring partner," he said.

The lips were pursed; unconvinced. "What are your intentions towards my daughter, young sir?"

He cleared his throat. Here it came. "To be her Pair—and to be as good a friend as I can. But I assure you, I have no other…motives towards your daughter, and I am nothing if I am not honest."

"Humph."

Markooth exhaled and took a step towards the woman, who was still quite a distance away. "May I please see Ry-anne? I am very concerned."

An abrupt nod. "For but a moment. She is in with the nurse," she said and jerked her head towards a door to the left.

"Thank you."

Pursed lips were his reply. The woman watched him as he went inside and did not move for a good while. Markooth heard the medicine bottles clink as she eventually waddled away.

The room was uncomfortably stuffy, the window slats had been pulled tight and only candle flames lit the shadows. The mood seemed serious and it reminded him of Marlena's sending off, which gave him worry. Markooth could smell lavender oil, a calmer. The squat, brown-robed nurse turned and offered him a small smile. She was humming. A nursery song. He inhaled sharply, realizing that he was now hearing first-hand the same tender melody he had experienced earlier that morn. But that had been far away, in his house. It meant…no, they could not possibly be fusing so quickly. Could they? He pushed such a ridiculous thought away. Stuff and nonsense, Josephine would say.

Nodding towards the bed, Markooth silently asked the nurse whether he could venture closer. Still humming, she granted him permission with a generous bow. As the nurse trickled liquid from one bottle into another and then shook it up, Markooth took a seat next to Ry-anne. The stool was still warm.

Ry-anne slept. She was every inch the innocent child with flushed cheeks and mussed up hair. Her brow was damp, probably from dabbing with cool cloths like the ones Maid Gamine had carried.

"What ails her?" Markooth whispered to the nurse.

The nurse shook her head. "Her birth mammy says it's the night terrors, and that a bruise appeared on her cheek, sir. Why, it's just like the one you have, 'cept a mite fainter. If you don't mind my asking, are ya Pairs, sir?"

"Newly, yes."

The nurse unstoppered the bottle she had just shook and started to cram it with mint leaves. "Ah now, that explains it then," she said, as if it really did. "Ya have a fight or something, sir?"

"Something," he agreed.

The air reeked of mint. Markooth tried to calm the tickle of an approaching sneeze. The nurse sniffed as she performed her duties. "Well if ya don't mind me saying, sir, ya should probly be avoiding getting yerself into scraps. The little 'un here's still but a babby and she don't understand it. Plus I reckon it must hurt considerable bad."

Markooth licked dry lips and swallowed. He nodded absently, but his mind raced faster than a madman's. They were fusing! Now there was no way now he could allow Kelthro to request their separation. Not that he really wanted a damned babby for his Pair. Great Glandor he was more lonely with the girl than he had been without. The gulf between their ages was almost unbridgeable at this stage. Yet still it would be criminal to separate now; moreover, it would be agony. But Grand, what if his father hit him again? The poor child would feel his pain and wear his bruises.

Markooth sighed and got up sharply, the chair scraping loudly as he did. The nurse looked curious. "I have to be on my way," he explained. "Tell her I came by when she wakes, if you would."

"Oh yes sir, undoubted."

"Thank you." He walked fast, forgetting to bow.

"Oh sir!" came the nurse's shrill voice. "She awoke."

Markooth sighed and waited a beat before returning. His Pair's eyes were open but still sleepy. She groaned and Markooth watched her swallow three times, as though trying to rid herself of a bad taste.

"I think she needs water," Markooth said. He poured some liquid from a large clay jug into a small wooden bowl and took it to the bedside.

"Oh it's you. What do you want?" Ry-anne croaked.

Markooth sensed the nurse smile. "I heard you were sickly," he said, tilting the bowl to her mouth. She craned her neck up with an effort, but the water trickled down her cheeks and puddled at the sides of her throat. Markooth set the bowl down on the floor.

"Uck. Look what you made me do." Her voice was hoarse. She screwed her face up as the nurse busily dabbed it dry.

"Forgive me." The nurse moved away and fussed with a small tray of medicine. She started to grind up some butter nuts for a syrup mixture. They actually smelled nice, Markooth thought, remembering that he had barely eaten that morn.

"Won't," she muttered.

Markooth felt the nurse glance their way, but villagers were less nosy in the presence of Glandor's and, thankfully, she kept her thoughts to herself.

"What did you see in the barn?" he asked quietly, aware that the nurse was listening.

Ry-anne's mahogany eyes gazed his direction before turning away again. Long, dark eyelashes dusted her cheeks as she looked down. "Nothing. Was faint from the sun is all."

Markooth nodded, though he knew she was lying. "Very well, but do you know how your face came to be bruised?"

She shrugged. Lying down, it looked funny.

"It had to have come from somewhere," Markooth persevered.

"Stop talking to me like a babby. I'm eight seasons, you know."

"I know. But please tell me how you got the bruise," he said, as the nurse bravely tried to

pretend not to be at all interested.

"You did it!"

Markooth knew the nurse's eyebrows would be raised at that moment. His heart drummed. "No, no, Ry-anne. It wasn't me—you have to understand." Ry-anne deliberately turned away from him and faced her closed window. "Ry-anne," he tried, but it was useless. He could have reached out mentally and soothed her, but that would only bring them closer. Was that a good idea? His swelling thoughts threatened to burst his brain. Perhaps it was wrong for them to be Pairs. Perhaps the Fates really had misread their Destinies. But if they really were fusing, how could he ever let Father's anger be taken out on her as well? The answer was, he couldn't.

It would be to both their benefit if he helped his father rush through their separation.

FIVE

The strangest thing happened on the strangest day that Glandor had witnessed for some time. In the peak of warm Season, the day was overcast and wintry. There was nobody at the lake that day. Ry-anne had returned to the schoolroom, but her mind was not on the mentals and she kept crashing into the wall, much to all the girls' amusement.

"Try again Ry-anne. Only this time concentrate," snapped the Mentals instructor, Maid Moody—her real name was Modeeyah. More giggles from the girls, who could all do it well.

She sent them a mental scowl, but they just laughed quieter. Olah, a painfully skinny East winger like herself, waited in the air. Ry-anne wasn't sure, but thought Olah might have been Pappy Jenn's brother's partner's child's babby. They were one of the only families in the House poorer than her own. The class watched as Ry-anne rose up to join Olah in the air.

"Hi," she said to Olah.

Olah's smile was gentle, like the girl. You'd think if you flicked her she'd splinter up like an icicle. But no, Olah could perform this maneuver perfectly, just like the rest of the lazy horses.

"Take your positions," said Maid Moody.

The girls shifted in the air, one palm out in front and one palm back at the head, with the right knee higher than the left. Toes pointed. Eyes glued.

"Begin!"

Ry-anne inhaled and dove at Olah—the easy part—who effortlessly flung Ry-anne over her head. The skill was to avoid the wall. Ry-anne performed a tuck somersault and twisted so her back would take the brunt if she collided with the wall again. She tried to suck together some concentration and force her body to slow, imagining that it was already stopped. But her body obviously wasn't convinced and it bashed against the padded wall with a brain-rattling thud. Ry-anne slid down the side lazily, instead of pushing forward and control-falling to the floor.

"That wall mat's not soft enough, you know," she mumbled, toes touching the floor padding.

Maid Moody led her to the middle of the hall, where all the other girls waited, biting their lips like they didn't find their classmates' misfortune funny at all. Just then, Olah sank gracefully to the ground.

"You'll try it again next mental class, child. Maybe we should take the mats away, yes? Perhaps that would give you the incentive to actually come to a stop without any help from the wall."

Ry-anne narrowed her eyes at Modeeyah. I was concentrating, she thought hotly, I just can't do it. But she said, "Don't know why we gotta learn these things anyway. I've never fought nobody in my life."

"Nothing wrong with being prepared, my dear. Isn't that right girls?"

"Yes, Maid Modeeyah." Chorused all the good girls.

"Besides, it's marvelous exercise. So you'd better get in shape or you'll be repeating. Now…"

Whilst Moody rambled on about balance and poise, Ry-anne absently rubbed her cheek where the bruise had been, which still pained somewhat. It was nearly invisible now, thanks to nurse's magic ministrations. Well, the fat village woman claimed they were magic anyway. It

seemed to have worked, although this eve was bound to bring more bruises, she thought, feeling quite sorry for herself. She looked outside the open window slats at the grey day. The usual true blue sky was completely hidden by swaths of thick, ugly white and grey clouds. Perhaps it was disturbing her concentration.

Ry-anne turned away from the window to better pretend to be listening to Maid Moody's home study exercises. Her mind wandered to Markooth. He hadn't been to visit since the night after she'd gotten the bruise. Funny, he'd had a bad one on his cheek, too. But it was a good thing that they didn't see each other any more now, because Mammy Gamine said it would be pointless, considering they would soon be officially separated. When Ry-anne asked Pappy Johann whether he thought it was a good idea not to see Markooth, he seemed upset and never managed to tell her anything useful. And that wasn't like him. In fact, everybody seemed upset lately. Gwyneth said it was because Markooth wasn't as good a Pair as Davvy. But all Ry-anne knew was that it wasn't nice that her best Pappy was upset, especially not when she might have something to do with it.

They would find out the eve after this whether the Fates would allow them to be officially 'unpaired.' Then everybody, especially Pappy, might get back to normal.

"Isn't that right, Ry-anne?"

"Pardon Maid Moody—I mean, yes Maid Moody—I mean…"

Moody's face stormed. "What did you call me, child?"

She fidgeted. The girls snickered, except Olah, who looked stricken. "Ah…Maid Modeeyah."

"I distinctly heard Moody." Maid Moody stared.

Ry-anne stared back, confused, not breathing until Moody's breath, which smelled of unwashed teeth, floated away. Wasn't she going to say anything else? The black hairs above the instructor's lip twitched. The whole class was watching, grinning behind Moody's back. Ry-anne tried to practice a complacent look, which would show everyone that she wasn't bothered. But her blasted lip wouldn't stop wobbling.

"Well what do you have to say for yourself!?" Moody bawled. Foul breath washed over Ry-anne once again and she almost retched. "Eh?"

Ry-anne's gaze flickered. She didn't have to shout so loud did she? Tears welled up and she tried so hard not to let them drip. Her lip twitched so she bit down on it. Hard. "Sorry."

"Pardon?" Moody cocked her ear, still yelling. Her eyes were wide, like a madwitch flinging a spell. She never blinked.

"Sorry, Maid Modeeyah."

Modeeyah pursed her lips, making the lip hairs spike up even more. Sighing and blasting Ry-anne with that air, too, who closed her eyes to escape the gale, Moody's head shook. "I don't know. Get you gone, all of you. I really don't know what's becoming of you, Ry-anne. Perhaps it's this new Pair of yours." Some of the girls stopped to listen, whilst others shoved their backs wanting out. "Bad influence is he? He's certainly too old for you, I'll tell you that for nothing. I don't really care that he's heir to the House either—Grand keep him—I wouldn't even care if he was the Grand of Glandor—bless her and cherish her O gracious, worthy ruler—it's still not natural to put two together like that."

Ry-anne automatically kissed her fist and pressed it to her breast, just as Moody did. It's not our fault, she wanted to say. But a desire to please made her say something else. "He's not

going to be my Pair for much longer. We might be separated by the eve after this."

Moody nodded. "Good. Very good. That will be a good thing, child."

"Yes," Ry-anne agreed. Moody seemed finished, so she rushed out while there was still a chance. "It will be good," she said, alone in the back room as she hunted for a warm over-robe. So why had she felt like crying? It's the horrible, worrying grey days, she told herself. They were getting to everybody, that's all.

Kyna stood outside, twisting one dark curl around her forefinger and toeing the dirt with her sandals. "Ry!" Her eyes lit up.

"Oh no, wadda you want?"

"Mammy Helene wants you to take me down the village to get some medicine for Nanne."

Ry-anne's gaze went to the sky. "Are you sure, Kyna? On a day so dark?"

"Yup. Nanne's awful ill."

"Well, I suppose we gotta go then." She glanced nervously at the sky. "But I don't know..."

Kyna shrugged, twisting her lips from one side to the next. She had been licking a blackberry tart and her face was all yacky with drool and sticky fruit.

"Come on then, but wipe your mouth won't you? I'm not going into the village with you looking like that." Kyna picked up the skirt of her robe and wiped her face with it. "Oh now that was smart, Kyna. Mammy Helene's gonna be real pleased with you for making her extra washing."

Kyna cocked her head, frowning. She didn't understand. "You think?"

"Oh just come on then. But walk quicker than you usually do. I've got mental exercises to practice before meal room, and we don't want to be outdoors if anything breaks through."

"Nothin' ever breaks through," Kyna said.

That wasn't strictly true. It had been Seasons since any outside forces had penetrated the Grand's protective shield—and there had certainly been no invasions in Ry-anne's lifetime—but when faced with such an unusual sky, people tended to stay indoors.

Kyna's grubby hand popped out. Ry-anne stared at it and shook her head. "No way, little sis. I'm not holding that muck. Just walk normal right next to me and stop acting like a such a babby." She had reached the top of the incline outside the 8-10 Seasons' schoolroom before realizing that Kyna had not moved.

Ry-anne threw her head back. "Oh for Grand's sake!" She stomped towards the smaller girl and grabbed the outstretched hand. "So did Mammy Helene say we have to go to the Fishing village again?" she asked as they approached the main arches that framed the House's grounds.

Kyna shrugged. "Fishing I think."

"And what should we get? Cod Oil?"

"Ah…" Kyna chewed her lip and squinted one eye, in deep thought.

"Kyna?"

"Mm. Fink so."

"Don't say fink, Kyna. You don't want everyone to think you're a babby, do you?"

Kyna thought harder. Eventually she shook her head, shaking it so wildly that the curls slapped each cheek. She giggled. "Nope."

Ry-anne looked up to the sky. The grey sky. The clouds were so black and heavy that Ry-anne wondered how they could possibly stay all the way up there. She wondered if it would rain. An invading breath of chill air slithered up her spine and twisted around her neck. Gooseflesh

raised on her arms and chest. She shuddered.

They hurried on, shoulders shucked against the cold and Kyna being tugged after, who kept sticking spare fingers in her mouth and gazing around at any stray person. And there were not that many, Ry-anne noticed. Only a few Family rushed about, in a hurry to get to wherever. Just Family and a handful of village workers. A woodman trundled out of the side exit, flicking the reigns of his rickety cart, shouting a 'How do' to somebody he knew.

"Ry-anne! How do you go?" a lanky distant cousin asked.

"Well, cousin," she called back, unsure of his name.

They passed out of the House's official grounds, under the magnificent silver trees that were sculpted over generations to resemble a twisting, elaborate archway. But today, their usually smooth silver barks were an uninspiring shade. Wings flapped, sounding like a servant girl beating the dust out of a rug. Ry-anne looked up. A crow swooped towards the middle of the archway, an inert pink worm crushed in its wicked black beak, and perched atop it. As they walked on, Ry-anne's neck crawled, sensing the weight of the threatening sky above.

Once they were beyond the archway, Ry-anne bent around to see the gold Glandor crest of red fire, which was symbolic of how the Grand would always tend the flames that kept Glandor safe and separate from the more dangerous Dimensions. But today, the watching crow's scaly claws clutched the top of the crest, its inky tail feathers obliterating part of it. For some reason, Ry-anne found the sight unnerving.

"Fink it's gonna rain, Ry?"

Ry-anne stopped herself from looking up again. Instead, she lengthened her strides, desperate to complete the errand and get safely back to the Wing. "Probably. Clever you for not bringing your over-robe."

"I'm cold," Kyna said, just as the first spots of rain dripped onto Ry-anne's nose.

Ry-anne tutted. "Well you should have remembered your over-robe then shouldn't you?"

"S'pose."

They walked on in silence and the spots of rain soon became a downpour. Ry-anne pulled her over-robe off and laid it over Kyna's head, telling her to hold tight to it. A freak gust of wind tugged the robe out of one of Kyna's hands. She screamed.

"Calm down!" Ry-anne shouted over the wind before retrieving the robe. "Just don't get it mucky or I'll kill you—and so will Mammy Gamine."

Kyna's eyes widened, but her little fingers clutched tight onto the over-robe, knuckles turning white with the pressure and the sudden cold. "Shall we run?"

Ry-anne frowned up into the rain. She could see the edge of the Fishing village now, with its shoddy tents. But at least they would be warm and dry unlike this biting rain, which had drenched her hair and robe, sealing it all against her numb skin. "Yes. Come on."

They squelched over the muddy grass, splattering muck onto their robes. It was hard to run with sodden skirts, which seemed as heavy as potato sacks and were by now just as filthy. But Ry-anne ploughed on, her fingers gripping Kyna's knobby elbow. Eventually, shrieking like babby's, they found shelter from the elements under the first tent they came to.

Dryness. "Thank the Grand!"

"What terrible weather we've had of late."

Ry-anne looked up from shaking off her robe. She shivered. "I—I beg your pardon?"

The pale man behind the fish stall was not familiar. He was dressed all in black, unlike

the usual bright tunics these villagers wore. All his skin was covered, save for the long skeletal fingers that poked out of mutilated gloves. They reminded her of the crow's scrawny claws. He wore a strange stiff hat that cast a shadow over his pointy features, so that Ry-anne could not make out the color of his eyes. His face seemed to have no expression, but his quiet arresting gaze said so much. It talked about fear. Evil. Pins and needles fizzed down her arms, causing an involuntary spasm. Ry-anne clenched her teeth together and tried to stay in control.

"I said, 'what terrible weather we've had of late.'" He spoke without moving his face. Only those thin, bone white lips moved. The eyes were rooted on her own. Ry-anne could not manage to rip her eyes away from his dark gaze. A menacing smile played on the mouth, under the guise of pleasantry. Beside her, Ry-anne heard Kyna twist the rain out of her now straight, long hair and giggle delightedly as it splashed to the crude stone floor. "See Ry? See all the water? You could go swimming in my hair couldn't you?"

"Mm." Ry-anne said, uncertain as to whom she was addressing—Kyna, or this…man.

"How can I be of service girls? Cod oil?" The voice did not seem like it belonged to the body. It was too friendly and chipper to originate from this unmoving figure. "As usual." The last words echoed after the mouth had already stopped moving.

"U-ugh…" She tried again. "Kyna. Do—do you have the trades?"

"Uh oh. Forgot."

For an instant, Ry-anne forgot about the man. All she could think of was how Kyna had dragged them all the way over here, out of her way, only to neglect to remember the trades. She whirled on her. "How are we supposed to buy the oil now th—?" Kyna was gone. "Kyna?"

"Perhaps you need to look further a field." The voice was different. Ry-anne spun back around. He smiled a twisted smile, using only the left side of his face. But his eyes were huge. Bulging. Gleaming with wicked joy. His long, yellow fingers were pointing. As if possessed, Ry-anne followed the line of his fingers. Kyna was up in the air. Up high—a dot. She was blowing away!

"My Grand!" It was a screech. "Oh my Grand!"

Her sister was terrified. The cries filled Ry-anne's ears, tore her insides, sped up her heart. She chucked a glance back at the man, but he was gone, and the usual oil seller stood in his place, clothed in a sunny yellow tunic. His upturned face was mortified. Everywhere people were spilling out of their tents, screaming and pointing at the sky.

Ry-anne looked back. And he was there! The man was up in the sky, clutching tightly to her baby sister.

"Ry!" Kyna's cry was painful. Even at such a distance, Ry-anne could see her small arms flailing. Saw her struggle away from the man as he pulled her higher and higher. Further and further away.

"Oh Grand!" Ry-anne started to run. She took off at speed and flew up towards them, on trajectory for a crash. Rain blinded her, freezing her eyeballs. Kyna held out her arms, stretching out her fingertips. The crow man's laugh echoed through the dark sky, echoed in Ry-anne's ears. Taunting.

"O Kyna sweet Grand—oh Grand!" Ry-anne concentrated with all her might, imagined her body traveling faster. Faster. As though she had already reached her target. But Kyna was ripping away at violent speed and Ry-anne could not keep up. Black curls fluttered like pretty ribbons caught up in a tornado. Her face was creased in horror.

Ry-anne thought furiously about who could help. His was the first name her mind came up with. The only one who might hear. The only one who might not disregard her call.

Markooth!

Markooth puffed, exhilarated from a good brisk ride. He did this a lot, riding out far into Glandor past the villages and small towns and hamlets that serviced the House, all helping in their own way to keep their Dimension running smooth and safe. It was refreshing to get away from the House and the Family—especially his Immediates.

This time he slowed early out of hunger, at Ricefield town, just past the Fishing Village. That was where Marlena had died, and neither he nor Lefus had ever been able to go there again. It was easier just to avoid the place. Still, he always got a shiver when he passed, no matter how fast Grey's strong legs could take him. Funny, Markooth thought, how you could ride past the weather. Back at the House and before the Fishing village, the sky had frowned, violent iron clouds scudding across it. The rain had fallen in slants, like needles, and stabbed his numb skin. But above Ricefield was an aquamarine sky, and there was not a cloud in sight. He could even feel his drenched robes starting to dry, and the sun warmed his spirits and lifted his mood.

This next eve he and Ry-anne would probably be separated.

The thought shocked him. He had tried to avoid thinking about it. Would he ever get another Pair? Would the separation actually hurt? Markooth stuffed such thoughts to the back of his mind.

"Thanks, girl," Markooth said, still a little breathless. He leaned forward in the saddle, the leather squeaking as he patted his filly's shoulder. He dismounted, the reigns jingling musically as he let them go. Grey snorted and whisked her tail.

"I'll get you some water, girl, don't you worry."

Grey's huge brown animal eyes watched Markooth walk over to a stone bakery before she lowered her head and started to clip the lush, emerald grass.

"Hello, Fredra," he said, nodding to the old grey woman who owned the bakery after stepping inside. It was literally roasting in the small building because Fredra and her young mute orphan granddaughter did all the cooking in the back. But it smelled divine, a combination of delicious aromas from flour to sugar and butter, all of which served to tease him and make his stomach gurgle even louder.

"Good morn, sir Glandor. Terrible weather you got behind you, ain't it? Hope it don't forecast a rupture in the Dimension."

"I'm sure the Grand, Glandor bless her and save her, has it all under control. I just hope it's not going to blow over this way. Hello, Lily." Freda's young granddaughter stood at the back of the poky room. She gave him the sweetest smile and smoothed her hair, which escaped from her waist-long plaits. He noticed that her face was flushed. From the heat, he presumed.

The old woman smiled, making her affable face crease up like a crumpled napkin. "Even so, you ought just be careful on your way back th' House, sir Glandor. Will I get you your usual?"

"If you please. That's just what I need."

Fredra nodded to Lily who selected two butter and currant scones and passed them to her grandmother, who wrapped them in a napkin for him. "There you go, sir Glandor."

"Wonderful. Here you are." Markooth fished in his belt pouch and brought out some Tender. He handed Fredra two large intricately chiseled pebbles that portrayed the Glandor crest

on one side and a portrait of Madrea on the flip.

"That's much too much, sir Glandor."

Markooth shrugged and started on his way so that she couldn't complain. It embarrassed everyone.

"Thank you, sir."

Giving them a wave, Markooth walked over to Grey whose wet, pink nose started to twitch when she smelled the fresh scones. "No, not for you girl. You've your own bag of food."

Markooth grabbed her reins and led Grey in the direction of a small stream to the west part of the town, making sure to keep the scones well away from her reach.

The stream burbled and trickled directly through a small glen of conifers. It was a run off from the Green Sea, so called because the water was so clear that you could see the bed of seaweed and water plants that grew below. It was chock-full with a seemingly infinite supply of cod that gave the Fishing village both its name and its business. Grey bent her neck to drink, showing her pink tongue and huge, comical teeth that always reminded him of Bucky, a cousin who endured constant taunting because of his own massive teeth.

Famished, Markooth sat down beside Grey, took one scone out of the napkin and raised it to his mouth.

MAAAAARKOOOOOOTH!

The mental hit him hard, clanged his brain against his skull like a ringing bell. The scone fell from his lips and landed in the stream with a ploink. It drowned. His vision blurred. Blind, Markooth thought he heard a cackle echo around him. He spun about trying to find its source and couldn't. He wiped invisible rain from his eyes. When his vision sharpened, a devil's face grinned fiendishly at him. A devil garbed in black.

Markooth yelled and scuttled back, trying to escape the man's glare. "Kyna!" The words came from his own mouth but he knew they were not of his making. He felt his own arms shoot up. Stretch skywards…and he knew why.

"Great Grand." It was a sickened whisper.

The cackle grew to a demonic chuckle, and the image of the man in black vanished.

I come! he promised, vaulting onto Grey. Snatching up her reins, he rode hard. Right into the heart of the glaring sky.

* * *

I come!

Ry-anne heard Markooth's assurance. Oh Grand, but it was too late. Kyna was torn away. First her right leg went, then the left. Next was her torso—it was ripped out of sight, torn out of the sky. Out of reality. Ry-anne screamed as loud and hard as possible, thinking that as long as she was pouring all her effort into something, then she wasn't letting Kyna go without a fight.

Ry-anne's screams mixed with Kyna's and clanged into the crow man's deep throated chuckle. He pulled her sister's body into oblivion, one hand over the other, making them vanish one by one, like a devilish festival jester pulling pretty ribbons out of his sleeve. Only he was pulling Kyna in.

Hooves clomped far below. Dizzingly far below. Markooth!

But Kyna's neck was disappearing. Even as Ry-anne stretched and began to close. Even as

Markooth rocketed upwards towards them. Ry-anne's face and ears were freezing as she zipped through the clouds, whole body strained. Hoping.

Kyna's face blinked out.

Destiny had erased her existence. The child's screams hung around long after she was gone, until they too died to nothing. The crow man tipped his hat to Ry-anne before vanishing himself.

Ry-anne screamed again until there was no more breath left with which to scream. And still she kept on screaming. Her lungs felt like they folded inwards with the pressure. And she was falling. Falling fast like a stone. Yet she couldn't seem to…really could not seem to…care.

The last thing she remembered for some time was that Markooth caught her, saving her from certain death.

SIX

The Grand of Glandor felt the child fall from her Dimension. She closed her eyes in pain. When she looked up and managed to come away from the window, Lyelle was staring at her with hard eyes.

"You could have prevented that child's death."

The Grand looked down at her old fingers, smooth and dry. She rubbed each smooth, dry finger in turn, between forefinger and thumb. Eventually she nodded. "But this is my task, Priestess."

Lyelle took a step closer. Her sandals tapped against the hard floor. "Destiny is your task?"

The Grand swallowed. "Sometimes, Destiny needs a little help along. Besides, you have just witnessed a strong, old evil. You felt its power through me, did you not?"

Lyelle sighed. Sadness made her voice tight. "I just don't understand why you had to let them take that child. I can't believe that Destiny would write such an horrendous fate for that young babby."

"Worse horrors will visit Glandor, Priestess. I am merely preparing the ones who will play the principal roles in this drama." Her face closed off for a moment, like a curtain drawn. "Besides, if one has not experienced true evil, how can one know how to fight it?"

Lyelle looked at the woman—her youngest sister—and felt nothing but disgust. Heresy. She swiftly kissed her fist and pressed it to her bosom. Her fingers trembled. She spoke through clenched teeth. "And just what…gave you…the right…to decide the Destiny of others?"

The Grand looked at her squarely. The eyes showed no remorse. "Destiny," she said, quite simply.

* * *

Ry-anne woke up in the dark. Kyna was dead. Her eyes bulged and flicked about, casting for the crow man. When would he come back for her? Ry-anne heard hushed talking—Kyna was dead, you know. They had put Ry-anne in with Pappy Jenn and Mammy Gamine in the spare room. They had cleaned out disused, broken furniture and robes that no longer fit. It smelled musty and old. Ry-anne pushed back the sheets and scrambled out of the room, rushing towards the light and out of the—dead Kyna gone—dark. Her back scratched as imagination conjured up an image of the man in black. In her mind he stretched out for—Kyna—her, staring with those bulbous eyes, reaching with claw-like fingers.

She whimpered and scampered out of the room. Lamps burned outside. It was the middle of the night, but her Immediates were still up. She heard Pappy Johann and Mallun and Mammy Gamine talking sadly. There were lots of sighs. Ry-anne crept closer, feet padding over the wooden floor and a draft invading her thin eve robe.

"Poor Jenn," Pappy Mallun said. "Grand, as if he hasn't had enough to cope with these past Seasons."

A chorus of agreement.

"….-is he now? With Helene and the babbies?" Pappy Mallun's deep voice rumbled, making it hard to figure out what he was saying.

"Yep. They haven't…out of…room since…Glandor boy brought Ry-anne back," Mammy Gamine said. She spoke much quieter than usual.

"Thank the Grand our little Ry-anne is well."

"Oh yes." Mammy Gamine and Pappy Johann.

Silence.

Kyna's dead…dead…dead.

"I know we're all distraught—Kyna was our baby too but," a tut from Pappy Johann. "Jenn and Helene…I don't know if they can cope with this. You feel it sharper when it's your birth child don't you?"

"Oh undoubted. Undoubted Johann." Mallun agreed.

Another thick silence. They were thinking about Kyna, who was dead you know. Grand, she was dead.

"So what was all this Ry-anne was coming out with, Gamine? Johann was saying she was carrying on about some man in black."

"Oh dear dear, yes," Gamine whispered. "She said a man took Kyna away. Dragged her into the sky. Hysterical, she was. We couldn't calm her for an age, could we Johann?"

"No. She was absolutely…," he sighed. "She ought not have experienced such a thing as this, Mallun, not at such a tender age. You know the Judiciary questioned the village folk?"

"No!"

"Yes. Many witnessed the whole horrid affair for themselves. They said that Ry-anne tried to save Kyna—the Grand please rest her—wouldn't give up until she was gone."

"Really? My, but that's awful. That'll stick with her Johann, certain it will."

"I just hope she's young enough to forget it. With time, you know?"

A long sigh. "Yes."

"And then Ry-anne fell to the ground. Had no will to keep up apparently. It was pure luck the Glandor boy was there to catch her."

"Really?"

"Although I don't know what he was doing there," Gamine put in.

"He said she called him."

"She called him? I hadn't heard that, it's been such an awful…such an awful…"

"I know."

Mammy Gamine sniffed. "Sorry."

Another long sigh. "Does anybody know what really happened?"

Ry-anne's interest piqued. She crept forward further. "Freak weather." Johann was really whispering now. Ry-anne edged forward more. "Something…villagers…really bad day you know…"

"Freak weather? Gracious, isn't that just another way of saying the Dimension has been ruptured? By Grand, how long has it been since that last happened—ten Seasons?"

"Perhaps. Although the villagers didn't see anything out of the ordinary—I mean, aside from the obvious that is."

"Be that as it may –"

The floor squeaked. Conversation stopped. Ry-anne froze.

"Ry-anne?" asked Mammy Gamine. Kyna was dead.

"Love, is that you?" Pappy Johann asked.

Ry-anne gave up and walked into the room. Her Immediates sat around, drinking. They all sat up a little straighter when she came in and pasted on bright smiles. “Hello sweetheart. Did we wake you up?” said Mammy Gamine.

Ry-anne shrugged, feeling awkward. There was a pause before Pappy Mallun spread his huge, bear arms for a hug. There was no getting out of it. So Kyna was dead, and Ry-anne sat on Pappy Mallun’s knee in the middle of the night and all the adults seemed nervous and weird. She just wanted to go back to bed. She said so. And then everybody wanted another hug—she didn’t know why, maybe they were feeling sadder than their smiles said they were—so when that was done she went back to the musty old room, when she really just wanted to go to her own bedchamber. She lay awake in the dark, looking out for the crow man. He could come at any time.

* * *

Next morn, she slept past the bells but nobody bothered to shout. Kyna was still dead. Breakfast in the meal room had been and gone and schoolroom had already begun. There was not a soul in the chamber when she padded about, only lots of unwashed goblets of wine, so she wandered into her own room intending to dress.

Pappy Mallun saw her in the corridor. His solemn face came to life. “Look who’s awake,” he boomed and grabbed her arm. “How goes my favorite girl?”

“Fine, Pappy.” Course she was. Kyna was the one who was dead.

“Give your old Pappy a hug.”

Ry-anne obliged before he went on his way, seeming much happier. Gwyneth’s door was ajar and Ry-anne nearly entered, but decided not to when she heard Mammy Gamine’s voice telling Gwyneth it was alright to cry. Instead she traipsed into her own chamber and took a fresh robe out of the chest. There was only one left.

“There you are!” Mammy Gamine put a hand to her ample breast. “Grand, we were worried about you. You mustn’t wander off like that, honey. It frightens us. Now will I get you something to eat? A Ricefield sweet-treat?”

She shook her head. “I’m late for schoolroom, Mammy. Why did you not wake me?”

“Oh Ry-anne, you don’t need to go to school this morn!”

Ordinarily that would have sounded good, a free day off, but today Ry-anne wanted out of the House. “I have a test,” she lied. “It’s important.”

“Oh, it can’t be that important. I’m sure they’d understand, what with...” Mammy welled up and trailed off.

“But I can’t miss it—it wouldn’t do to fall behind! This test might even effect our Allocations—and you don’t want me to be a stable mistress do you?”

Mammy Gamine sighed. “Very well. But I shall take you there and you will wait for the nurse to meet you afterwards. And remember, if you do decide you want to come home—at any time—you tell the Maid and somebody will come for you. Do you hear me sweetheart?”

Ry-anne nodded and pulled her eve robe off, letting it drop to the floor. She waited to see if Mammy would chastise this messiness, but she didn’t. Strange. Mammy Gamine helped Ry-anne into the day robe and fussed with her knots. Finally, after Mammy had dressed and forced half a warm muffin on her and made her take some milk, they were ready to go.

"Mammy!" Ry-anne moaned, itching to be on their way as Mammy left instructions with Pappy Johann. "Now everybody will stare at me when I walk in!"

"Are you sure she should be going?" Pappy Johann asked, nodding at her and rubbing sleepy eyes.

"She wants to. But you can come home whenever you want, can't you love?"

"Alright, but you must promise to be careful and remember, don't go anywhere without an adult. And if you want to come home, just—"

"Just tell the Maid and she'll have somebody come and pick me up. I know, I know, Pappy."

Pappy's smile was small. "Good girl. Give me a hug before you go." Ry-anne suffered more hugs and kisses before Mammy Gamine finally felt ready to leave. And then another before she went into the schoolroom, when Mammy didn't seem to want to let go. But Ry-anne knew that nobody would want to go near her if they knew she'd told Kyna that she would kill her.

When Ry-anne walked into the schoolroom, her sandals clacking conspicuously against the wood, nobody seemed to know what to say. Not even the new spell Maid, who eventually offered the obvious, "How do you feel?"

At break time, the girls clustered around Ry-anne. "Your babby sister blew away and died yesterday, didn't she?" said a freckled red head called Meemee.

"Yes," said Ry-anne.

"Are you very sad? I'll bet you are. I was so sad when my dolly blew away in the storm last season, I'd had it since I was a babby. But then Mammy got me a new one and it was alright."

"Go 'way, Meemee."

The red head shrugged. "See you!" She skipped away.

So it went on, as girl after girl asked whether her babby sister was really dead, like their Mammies and Pappies said she was. And then they all left, leaving only Olah.

"My Mammy Urla says you were very brave," she said in a voice that was mice-quiet. "And you're not to be too sad cos Kyna's gone to the Dimension of the Dead, where Granpappy Hal lives, and he'll look after her."

Ry-anne nodded and Olah eventually slipped away. Olah might have thought Kyna was happy in the Dimension of the Dead, but Ry-anne wasn't so sure. The Maid came out and clanged a small bell, indicating that break was over. They all piled back into the schoolroom and everybody let Ry-anne go first. That was fun. It made her feel good and important. But you're still dead, aren't you Kyna?

* * *

Nerves seethed through Markooth as he made his way to the North wing. The whole Family was in mourning, he saw, watching the cousins, aunts, uncles and halfies go about their daily business, whether that be to the schoolrooms, the market, or the Judiciary meetings that had been set up to try and allay people's fears. But wherever they went, they went robed in buttercup silk as a sign of respect. Traditionally, only the Immediates of the one who passed did not don the yellow silk. Markooth could not decide where he fitted in with that. Being Ry-anne's Pair, he should have worn his usual dress, but this was not a normal Pairing. Eventually he had decided on the yellow.

The North wing guards let him past on sight, bowing deeply when they saw him.

"Sir Glandor. The Grand is expecting you."

"Thank you, Markkus, Petter." He nodded, unable to be more sociable because of the knot in his stomach. Petter opened the single door behind him and waved him through.

Only momentum propelled Markooth forwards. His own feet might not have obeyed had he actually instructed them to walk. What could the Grand of Glandor possibly want with him? It was common knowledge that she never took visitors these days, except for her Priestess sister who had performed his and Ry-anne's Pairing. Could that be what she wanted to discuss? His Pairing? Gulping back his anticipation, he stepped inside the Grand's room and was somewhat startled as the door closed behind him with a soft click.

Sensing the power in that room was like walking into a stone wall. The air was so thick it seemed to buzz. Unnerving.

Markooth took a deep breath and spoke to the Grand's back. "You requested my presence, O Gracious one?"

Silence. An elderly figure sat staring out of a window that was little more than a chink in the stone. This wasn't a room fit for a Grand, Markooth thought. It was more like a prison.

"Sometimes, Destiny demands that we commit crimes that are necessary to ensure the greater good. Perhaps, " she spread her arms wide, "perhaps this is my cell. One of my own making."

Markooth's ears burned. The greater good? What did she mean by that? He cut off his line of thinking when the Grand's shoulders appeared to tense. "I-I do beg your pardon, my Lady. It was not my intention to offend you."

She blew out twin streams of air from her nose and turned carefully around. She had a stern face. Her cream robe, trimmed with gold and red like the Glandor crest, was so long that it covered her toes. Markooth had had no idea that the Grand was so old.

Suddenly, the old woman's severe mask split into a grin. "I protest! I am not that old! I am but sixty seasons and one, I'll have you know. The other fools lasted much longer than me."

"I—"

"Bah! Get away with your apologies. It is, after all, my job to know everything." She bent forward and the uncomfortable looking chair creaked like straining leather. "And I'll tell you something for nothing, I've read far worse than you."

"That is good to know," he managed.

She smiled. Then the face hazed, the easy smile replaced by a somber face and grave eyes. "Now! I must speak with you about this Pairing nonsense. I expect that you want this whole to-do about the separation cancelled, in light of last eve's events."

"Yes, my Grace. In fact, I am just now returned from the Judiciary to that end, but the lady said…"

"She said you would be unable to stop it without the consent of a birth parent from both sides."Markooth paused and licked his lips. "Yes—I mean quite so…my lady."

"Oh do that again—that was simply delightful!" she clapped her wrinkled hands together, grey eyes twinkling.

"I beg your pardon, my lady?"

The Grand wiped a tear of laughter from one eye and waved her hand. She looked to the right. "Yes of course I know I'm being naughty, Onigh, you stuffy old sow," she said.

Who was she talking to? Markooth surreptitiously looked around the room. He couldn't see

a soul. Just then, the Grand's enigmatic gaze snapped back. "Do go on."

Markooth frantically tried to remember what he had been saying. "R-right. As I was saying, the Maid told me that if I couldn't get the birth parents' permission, then the only other way to get the separation order cancelled was if the Grand vetoed the application. I requested an appointment with you but…I didn't actually think she'd put it in."

"She didn't—useless mare. Nevertheless—and lucky for you, I might say—I'm something of a nosy old crone and it was I who asked for a meeting with you. That's why you're here, young sir. You didn't think I invited you around to share a bowl of herb tea did you?"

"N-no. Of course not, my lady. I would never be so presumptuous."

"Fascinating." The Grand rested her right cheek on one fist and gazed at him.

Markooth squirmed. He could feel his hands becoming sweaty. "What's that, my lady?"

"You remind me entirely of somebody I once knew. So gallant."

Markooth blushed outright. The Grand guffawed and clapped her hands together again. "Marvelous! Handsome and modest."

Markooth swallowed. "Ah, my lady. The separation order?"

She jutted her chin out, as though trying to hear him better. "Hm? Oh yes, the separation order. Well I cancelled that hateful thing. Your Immediates have no hold over you when it comes to something as important as your Pair."

Markooth let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you, my lady. I cannot tell you how much—"

"Ah but you could show me how grateful—no no. Better not. They might discharge me!" She roared with high-pitched laughter, one hand pressed to her chest as though it hurt. Markooth was confused. Eventually, the Grand managed to calm herself. "Apologies, pretty one. I am only playing. Now get gone—you've dragged me away from my window for far too long. It misses me."

"I apologize, Great Grand. Thank you again. If there is anything I can ever do—"

"Oh there will be," she murmured.

"Excuse me?"

She sighed. "I said scoot. Leave an old woman to her shadows."

"Yes, my lady." He bowed deeply and turned to leave.

"Young sir."

He faced her once again. "Yes, my Grand?"

This time, no mirth registered in her face and the power was almost tangible, suffocating. The room seemed darker, as though she had drawn a cloud over the whole land. When she spoke, her voice was cool and solid. "Your Immediates keep a secret from you Markooth, one that really ought to be discovered. Time runs short in this matter." Her face cleared and the very air seemed to brighten. Her grin was mischievous when she winked at him. "Now scat."

"Yes, my lady," he said and escaped.

SEVEN

The nurse who'd magicked Ry-anne's bruise away was waiting outside once school was over. There were more Mammies and Pappies present than usual, too. Nobody wanted to let their babbies make their own way home. As Ry-anne walked out, they would all shake their heads and murmur about how sad it was. This made Ry-anne lower her head even more and put on a sadder face, so they might feel even sorrier for her. It seemed to work. Some even had tears in their eyes. But then Ry-anne felt bad. Kyna had it worse—she was the one dead, so it should be her getting all the attention.

Nurse took her straight to the East Wing and into Mammy Gamine's and Pappy Johann's room. She found them around the table, busy discussing adult things that were quickly folded away when Ry-anne came in.

"Hello poppet—how did you fare at the schoolroom?" asked Pappy Johann.

Ry-anne shrugged. "Did a good luck spell."

"That's nice, pet. Why don't you go and play with Gwyneth? Your Pappy and I have some things to sort out," said Mammy Gamine.

Ry-anne tutted but trudged off to find Gwyneth. She was in her room on the bed with Davvy. "I'm telling!" Ry-anne shrieked and spun on her heel.

Gwyneth was up in a flash. The door banged shut in Ry-anne's face. "You will not!"

"We were only talking, Ry-anne," Davvy said softly.

Ry-anne liked Davvy. He'd let her count his freckles once. Well, she'd tried, but had gotten to thirty and then lost track. Plus she hadn't known what came after thirty. Ry-anne squinted at him. "Honest?"

"Honest. Your Mammy and Pappies know I'm here."

Ry-anne sighed. "Fine, I won't tell then." She slunk over to the bed and lay down next to Gwyneth who was sat cross-legged next to Davvy.

Gwyneth played with her hair. "How're you doing, Fuzzy?" she asked.

Ry-anne craned her neck so she could glare at her sister. "Ya'd better shut it Gwynnie, or I'll tell Pappy Johann that you were kissing Davvy."

"Ry! For Grand's sake, mental kisses are allowed at our age. Aren't they Davvy?"

"They are."

"You're both lying—I'm telling Pappy!" Ry-anne shot up off the bed and stomped out of the room.

"Ry-anne come back here!" Gwyneth called. "Oh blow you then."

"Perhaps you ought to check on her," Davvy whispered.

"She's just looking for attention. I'm sad too you know."

Listening outside, Ry-anne rolled her eyes—she was quite good at it now. She looked up to see Andee stalking down the corridor. He looked mad. Ry-anne decided he needed cheering up.

"Hey Andee, wanna go climb the cider trees?" He glared before shoved her out the way. She banged against the corridor. "Ow! You fat horse!"

"Well why would I wanna go climbing, Ry-anne? So you can lose me, too?"

Ry-anne narrowed her eyes and imagined that she was actually good at spells and could shrivel him to the size of a carrot. But Andee stayed the same size. Blast! "Where's Hann then?"

"How should I know!" he barked, but an inch from her nose. She shoved him away like yucky vegetables and bolted out of the East Wing, stopping at the head of the stairs awhile to see if anybody cared. They didn't. So she kept on going out of the House, past the schoolroom and up towards the lake. When she reached the cider trees that protected the oval expanse of water, she slowed to a walk, nursing a stitch in her side. As soon as her breathing recovered she jogged on, not stopping until she met the spruces demarking Markooth's house.

By now the sky was starting to darken, the sun was falling and Mammy and Pappy moon stood high in the sky. Faint, but there. Puffing, she walked the rest of the way to the house and knocked on the door.

Eventually, Lefus answered as she had raised her fist to knock again. Something about him reminded her of the crow man and she felt herself shrink. "May I—that is, would I be able to speak with Master Glandor?"

"You want me to ask if he'd like to come out to play?"

"If you would, sir," Ry-anne mumbled. Markooth? She tested gently.

There was a yowl from inside the house. Pots clattered loudly to the floor and something shattered.

Lefus laughed, only moving out of the way as Markooth appeared, clutching his head.

"Sorry," Ry-anne said.

Markooth exhaled and pinched the bridge of his nose, before smiling weakly and shaking his head. "Not to worry. It's good for you to practice your mentals. Come in a moment."

Lefus prowled about the meal room, searching for something to eat. Ry-anne felt cowed under his gaze, barely picking her eyes up off the floor. "I can sweep that up," she muttered, motioning to the mess on the floor.

"Good girl," said Lefus.

Markooth glared at his brother before smiling at Ry-anne. "That's not necessary, the servant girl will do it."

Ry-anne swallowed. "Everybody hates me for losing Kyna. Andee just shoved me and shouted at me, and nobody wants me around, Mammy Gamine told me to go play with Gwyneth cos they were too busy to talk to me, but Gwyneth didn't want me around cos she was with Davvy."

Ry-anne watched Markooth and Lefus exchange glances. "That isn't true, Ry," Markooth said gently.

Shrugging, Ry-anne pushed a pottery shard about with the tip of her sandal. Markooth fell quiet, making Ry-anne want to run away again.

"Lefus, don't tell Father Ry-anne was here."

Lefus raised an eyebrow and looked as though he was about to make a crude comment when Ry-anne felt a mental flash between them both. Lefus shrugged. "As you wish." He turned his back and started to pile ham onto huge slabs of bread.

"Come," Markooth said, nodding towards the door. "I ought to take you home. Your Immediates will be worried."

Ry-anne grunted as she shuffled outside.

They walked into the night. She wanted his hand for safety, something that would keep her pinned to the ground and stop her flying away like Kyna. But touching wasn't allowed between Pairs of their age.

"I didn't see you after schoolroom today," she said.

Markooth looked down at her. "I was a little busy today."

"Where did you go?"

Hesitation. "I went to stop the separation order."

"You mean we're still Pairs?"

Markooth's smile was soft. "For now, at least."

"Did you tell your Pappy what you were doing?"

He shook his head. Grit crunched under their sandals. "In fact, he's away right this moment to see what the council decided."

"That's sneaky." She nearly smiled.

Markooth did. "I know."

"I like you now."

He smiled again. They lapsed back into silence and trudged onwards. "Nobody believes me about the man I saw."

Markooth tensed. He took a deep breath. "That is understandable though. None of the villagers saw him."

"But you did."

She heard him gulp. It was a long time before he spoke again. "Well, I saw the image you sent me of him…I'm not sure if that counts…"

"You don't believe me either." She frowned hard. "I'm not frightened of him you know, I just want to know whether you can see him, too."

Markooth licked his lips. "I'm not sure what I saw Ry-anne."

Ry-anne sighed. They were past the lake now and it was getting really dark. The Mammy and Pappy moons glowed a sad white-blue. That was right, because it showed that they missed Kyna, too. The sun wasn't anywhere near so respectful. It kept on beaming, all happy and bright even though Kyna was dead. Ry-anne bit her lip, but the tears trickled out anyway. She wiped them roughly with her forearm and sniffled. Markooth noticed. He didn't say anything, but she felt his mental touch. Not a hug, which was not yet allowed, but a warm reassurance that seemed to embrace the air around her. It was nice, kind of special, although she was too embarrassed to thank him.

They reached the House and Markooth escorted her inside the East Wing entrance and up the stairs. "You mustn't come out to my house on your own again, Ry-anne. It's too dangerous."

"Cos of Lefus?" Their whispering voices echoed around the high ceiling.

Markooth frowned slightly. "No, I was thinking of what happened recently."

"Oh."

"Plus my Father won't be very pleased with me when he learns of the council's decision. "

Markooth's Pappy beat him. That was why she'd gotten the bruise that time, cos Markooth's Pappy had given him one. Strange how that didn't seem half as frightening now, considering what happened last eve. She shucked her shoulders. "He reminds me a bit of the man I saw."

"My Father?"

"No, Lefus."

Now Markooth looked really puzzled. "Lefus isn't like that person, Ry-anne. I promise.

Just next time you want to see me, send me a mental. I'm sure I can take it."

Ry-anne giggled. “Alright. And I’ll keep doing my exercises—I’ll get better soon.”

“I could help you, if you like.”

Ry-anne nodded, though she was certain she could master it herself.

“I’ll see you tomorrow aft, Ry-anne. I have to speak with your birth Immediates. Take care now.”

* * *

Mammy Gamine and Pappy Johann actually hadn’t noticed her absence. When Ry-anne wandered into their room, they were sat tight around the table with Pappy Mallun, talking in whispers and sighing a lot. Wine jugs cluttered the table.

“Hello,” she said.

Everybody turned around and lifted their heads, with effort. “Well, hello there. We haven’t seen you all eve—what have you been doing?”

I went out to see my Pair, she thought, but didn’t say it out loud, knowing that she’d probably get smacked if she did. “Me and Gwyneth played Stix.”

“How lovely. Come here and give your Mammy a hug.”

Ry-anne took a deep breath and let herself be squeezed before telling Mammy how tired she was. Mammy ruffled her hair and watched her go off to bed. Her stomach grumbled, but she knew nobody would come to the meal room, so instead she inspected her chamber for the crow man before going to sleep on an empty tummy.

The next morn, Mammy Gamine told her that she didn’t have to go the schoolroom again, but Ry-anne wrinkled her nose, moaning that there was nothing to do around the Wing all day. Eventuallym Nurse walked her over and Maid Fatbottom kept her after full of praise for the Good Health spell she had done a few morns past. Once again, Nurse was waiting to take her back to the East Wing.

That eve, Markooth didn’t come.

Next morn Ry-anne started crying when Moody tried to force her to do mentals. Everybody went quiet and Ry-anne ran home. Nobody seemed surprised that she was back early and without nurse. Instead, she was measured for a special robe for Kyna’s send-off. She was busy playing up and spinning around the corridor so that the too-long sleeves flapped, with the seamstress traipsing after her trying not to get mad, when she bumped into Pappy Jenn. Literally.

His face was dark. “Ry-anne! What are you doing acting the fool!”

Ry-anne’s head went into her neck. The young mousy seamstress stood frozen to one corner, clutching her tape tight.

“Well? What do you have to say for yourself—running around the corridor like a maddun!”

Ry-anne’s lip quivered. “Mmph…”

Pappy Mallun’s door whined open. “Jenn?”

Pappy Jenn turned around and his face fell into misery, like he couldn’t seem to hold himself up. She watched with horror as Pappy Jenn wailed like a newborn babby whilst Pappy Mallun cradled him in his thick arms. They forgot about Ry-anne and moved away.

“Sorry…I just…lost it Mallun. She…”

“I know, I know.” They disappeared inside Mallun’s chamber. The door closed with a bang.

All the doors were closed nowadays.

Sighing, Ry-anne hitched up the long robe and went back into her room so the seamstress, who looked as sad as everyone else, could finish pinning it. She kept hoping that Markooth would come, so at least somebody might pay some attention to her. But he didn't. The seamstress pricked Ry-anne's leg.

"Ow!" Ry-anne screamed at the top of her voice and then rolled on the bed, clutching her leg as though it really hurt. The worried seamstress came to see how she was but Ry-anne hissed and then buried her head in the pillows and cried fake tears.

"Come now, Maiden. I'll get you a soother for the prick—I am sorry about it."

Ry-anne sat up straight and laughed close in her face. "Ha! Fooled you!"

The seamstress smiled brokenly. "Yes. You did." She looked frightened, but Ry-anne was delighted to get a reaction out of somebody.

As the seamstress went back to work, every now and then Ry-anne pretended she had stuck her with the pins and howled. But the seamstress wizened up and Ry-anne soon grew bored of the game. There was nothing else to do but stand on the wooden block as the girl crouched behind her, trying to fix the hem.

Ry-anne started to worry. Had the crow man taken Markooth away, too? She wanted to call out mentally but was worried about hurting him. She'd lied about practicing. And so another eve passed without her Pair and Ry-anne started to believe he'd found out that she'd told Kyna she wanted to kill her.

* * *

The next aft came slowly. Ry-anne did not go to the schoolroom that morn, because they were preparing for Kyna's send-off. Eventually, they all gathered in the rose garden near the statue of the Grand, which was crammed tight once they were all inside. Everybody was smartly dressed—Immediates in white robes embroidered with yellow, the rest of the Family in yellow silk. The whole House had watched them proceed slowly out of the East Wing, clutching bouquets of white and yellow roses.

Pappy Jenn, Mammy Helene and Andee stood in the center circle, their heads looking at the ground. Sickly Nanne had had to be left with the nurse. Ry-anne was with Mammy Gamine and Pappy Johann stood on their left, with Pappy Mallun and his boys on the right making up the inner circle. All the other Family made up five more circles in order of who was most closely related to Kyna's Immediates.

Ry-anne couldn't see Markooth. His Immediates hadn't bothered to come either and Ry-anne started to get mad. He really ought to have been there, and if he wasn't half-dead when she next saw him…well then, then she'd be really mad. She would have gone to Lefus' sending off if Lefus had died. Well, maybe not. But she shouldn't blame Markooth. He probably hadn't come because he knew that she'd killed Kyna.

The Priestess stood in the center, saying things about peace and rest and young lives cut short that made Pappy Jenn shake with bottled up tears. He wouldn't cry out loud in front of everybody, but he kept making loud hiccupping noises. Ry-anne felt sorry for him—he'd probably feel embarrassed about that later. Mammy Helene was not comforting him. Instead she stared straight ahead, as though there was nothing really living in her body anymore. Everybody else

was crying—even Andee—and Gwyneth was doing a good job of letting the tears trickle sadly down her beautiful face, to gain maximum sympathy. Only Ry-anne couldn't cry. Couldn't even force the tears when she tried to yawn without opening her mouth—which would give it away. She took this lack of emotion as a sign that she really was a heartless murderer.

The Priestess rambled on, coming now to the end of the ceremony. Which was why, Ry-anne thought, Pappy Jenn hiccupped again and bit his fist. He started to tremble. Andee looked up at him with wide eyes and touched his raised elbow, which only made Pappy Jenn shake even more. Mammy Helene still stared straight ahead.

"And now we shall all soar into the sky and send our flowers and thoughts to the Dimension of the Dead so that they can be with dear Kyna and give her comfort, until we meet again once our own lives have run short."

The gathering cleared their throats and started to move. People shuffled back to allow those with flowers more room. Pappy Jenn moved a glazed Mammy Helene to the side and whispered that he would take her flowers to Kyna. She nodded mutely.

Mammy Gamine smiled bravely at Ry-anne. Her eyes were red and swollen. Pappy Johann put one hand to his eyes, shook his head and then took hold of her. His fingers were wet and Ry-anne was shocked to find out that he had been crying. She didn't know that Pappy Johann ever cried and, somehow, that made him seem different to her. "You don't have to do this if you're scared honey," he whispered. "I can take your flowers up for you."

Ry-anne shook her head. "No. I should take them."

They were supposed to send the body up then, but the Judiciary guards had not found it, so all they had to send to the Dimension of Dead were arms of beautiful flowers, cut and dying. Pappy Jenn went first. Then Andee, which made the gathering cluck and shake their heads. "Poor child," they would say. "So young to be coping with something like this."

Are you going to lose me too?

Ry-anne bit her lip as Andee's words haunted her. Pappy Jenn and Andee waited in the air. Pappy Jenn still sobbed. Now it was the rest of Kyna's Immediates turn. Ry-anne took a deep breath. She closed her eyes and concentrated, feeling her eyeballs flicker under their eyelids. Her body grew light and her toes left the ground, making her stomach feel queasy. She lifted with the rest of them, drifting upwards through the warm air till they were half as high as the House. Opening her eyes, Ry-anne saw all her Immediates around her, each isolated in their grief. Grief that she had caused. Pappy Johann let his flowers go first, because Pappy Jenn did not seem able to. His eyes were tight closed and his face in pain. Mammy Gamine let go too, before Gwyneth and then Pappy Mallun and Hann and the twins.

Ry-anne swallowed and then opened her arms, freeing the flowers. She shaped her arms, drawing her elbows together and pushing her palms up to the sky, following the flowers and keeping them up and rising so they could complete their journey. The flowers rose ever upwards, joining the dreamy, growing cloud of white and yellow petals and fresh green stems.

A gentle song drifted up as the Family hummed the lullaby of the dead. It was a haunting, spiritual melody that flowed up as high as the flowers. One by one the flowers blinked out—like dead Kyna—as the Grand opened the Dimension a crack so they could pass away. Eventually—like dead Kyna—the flowers were all gone.

Ry-anne sank back to the ground. When her feet touched earth, it was all over. Kyna was really gone. Pappy Jenn folded into himself. Ry-anne's Immediates looked on sadly, helplessly.

Mammy Gamine and Pappy Johann reached for each other's hands. For some reason, Mammy Helene just seemed to notice Pappy Jenn was sad and offered him a limp hug.

"Oh Helene!" The sound was utterly mournful. He grabbed her so hard Ry-anne knew for sure that he must have squeezed all the breath out of her. Gwyneth turned from the inner circle, making the pebbles crunch. Ry-anne knew that she sought Davvy's face, and she watched him give her a reassuring smile. He was probably mentally holding her too, Ry-anne thought and felt a pang of loneliness and subconsciously looked for Markooth. But it was no use; he wasn't there.

The Family lingered in the background, seeming uncertain. But one by one, when Pappy Jenn had gotten hold of himself, everybody came up to take his and Helene's hands. "Grand go with you," they each said as they squeezed. And finally they left, murmuring to each other after the Priestess informed everyone that the feast of life, which would toast Kyna's short one, would take place in the main meal room, and they were all welcome.

"At least the sun was shining," one said. "That made it a little easier, I thought."

Ry-anne's anger bubbled. Fool horses! The sun was bad for shining and making people happy. It wasn't supposed to be a happy aft. Kyna was dead, didn't they know?

"And did you see little Andee's face? Oh, he looked sooo sad didn't he? I shall never forget that look as long as I live. Just terrible."

Finally, only the Immediates were left. They all started to hug. Pappy Jenn held small Mammy Helene in one arm and then fell onto Pappy Johann. Ry-anne stood around with Gwyneth and the rest of her halfies and waited for it to be over. It was when her stomach gurgled loudly that Ry-anne realized she had not eaten for at least a day and a half. Andee shot her a look and Ry-anne bowed her head, guilty for looking forward to the cakes in the meal room.

At length, her Immediates started to move. Sandals crunched noisily over the pebbles in the rose garden and then whispered on the grass as they exited the small space. Only then did Ry-anne notice that many villagers stood a small distance away, all bowing their heads as the Immediates passed. Pappy Johann smiled at them, nodding thankfully.

And there too was Markooth. He stood with the villagers, the sun making his yellow robe and sunny hair shine. Ry-anne suppressed the urge to run over to him, thinking that it might upset everyone. She felt a mental reassurance and warmth pervade her mood. She smiled.

Come to the feast? she asked carefully and watched him wince when it wasn't quite right. But he nodded and Ry-anne walked towards the House, alone amongst the group of Immediates, though suddenly feeling far less lonely.

The main meal room was decorated with sad, solemn white roses and slightly happier looking blueberry muffins—at least Ry-anne thought they looked happy. A village band played music in the corner. The lute strummed slowly whilst a fat man made the mouth wind sound extraordinarily beautiful. Ry-anne's stomach gurgled and she slipped away from her birth Immediates to grab a couple of cakes before the rest of the Family took them all. But when she put them to her mouth she almost gagged. Her nervous stomach would not allow any food, so she set them back down. Murderers shouldn't get muffins, she thought.

"Shouldn't put those back once you've had them in your grubby hands," Andee said, appearing out of nowhere.

Ry-anne made to walk away. She didn't want Andee getting mad—not now—when it would upset everyone. Or when he might tell everybody that she was the one who killed Kyna. That was the real reason she wanted away from Andee—so people wouldn't find out what she'd done.

It felt bad that she was only looking out for herself when Kyna was dead because she hadn't looked after her. Oh Grand, Kyna was dead—Kyna is dead? And didn't Andee look like Kyna with his huge eyes and their long, curled lashes—like Kyna's curls, flailing in the wind as she was ripped out of the sky?

Andee grabbed her wrist and pinched. Hard. Ry-anne tried to pry his fingers off. "Andee ow! Andee!"

His eyes burned, boiling with anger. Adults closed in. The murmuring conversation dwindled and the music ceased. Pappy Jenn hurried over, closely followed by Mammy Gamine. Markooth, who had just entered, looked very worried.

"Andee let go of your sister!" Pappy Johann ordered and shook Andee's hand. But he squeezed harder, violence flashing in eyes that would not be torn from her own.

"Ah-ow!" Ry-anne's lips were tugged down in a grimace. She wailed.

"She's not my sister!"

The Family inhaled sharply as one.

"Don't be so cruel," warned Pappy Jenn, shaking Andee's arm like he was throttling it. But Andee still wouldn't let go, not even as Ry-anne tugged and tugged.

"You'd better stop hurting your sister, Andee. And you'd better stop right now or you'll be in deep trouble when we get back in chambers." Mammy Gamine warned.

"Kyna was my sister but she lost her!" Andee shouted, pointing at Ry-anne.

"Stop it, Andee! Let go of her!" Crack! Pappy Jenn's palm smacked Andee's smartly across his cheek. He dissolved into tears and Ry-anne seized the opportunity to wrench away from him. She bolted out of the meal hall, sandals clattering over the polished wood like dozens more slaps.

"You go and find Mammy Helene and tell her what you've done," she heard Pappy Jenn saying before the doors thudded shut behind her.

There was a squealing sound as the doors were yanked back. Ry-anne sat on a cushioned stool, head burrowed in her arms on a decorative table. The finished rose-wood felt cool to her bare skin.

Mammy Gamine was flushed and puffing from the stress. "Just what do you think you are up to running out of here like that? This is Kyna's morn, Ry-anne. Now get back in there!"

"What for? Nobody wants me there!"

Mammy sighed and touched her shoulder. Ry-anne shook her off wildly. "Leave off!"

"Oh honey, it's not as bad as all that. Come back inside and everybody will be pleased to see you, you'll see."

"Won't."

A pause. "Suit yourself then." Mammy Gamine started to shuffle away. Her hand was on the door.

"Want my Pair," Ry-anne said and let it hang there. Mammy took time in answering.

"What was that?"

"Wanna see my Pair."

Mammy Gamine made a little squeak of surprise. "Why, you know I'd forgotten all about that. We didn't even find out if the separation order had gone through."

Ry-anne sat up and relished her next words, hoping they would get a rise from Gamine. "Markooth stopped it. Didn't even tell his Pappy, who he said would be real mad. We're fusing Mammy—s'why I got that bruise on my face 'member? Cos Markooth had the same one."

Mammy Gamine rubbed her eyes like she was very tired. Her words came out like a sigh. "That's partly what we were afraid of," she said. "Come on inside now, there's a good girl. Markooth is in there."

"Make him come out and see me."

Mammy nodded, eyes heavy and sad. "I suppose there's nothing we can do if you've already started fusing. It would be harder to separate you now than to let you stay together. Just don't wander off anywhere, you hear?"

"Yes, Mammy." Ry-anne said, rolling her eyes.

"You hear?"

"I hear, I hear."

Mammy disappeared through the doors. Ry-anne recognized Markooth's muffled voice. She crept closer.

"…ther asks me to send his apologies for not being able to attend, Maid Gamine. He would have liked to, only he's very ill. I'm certain he will have said some private prayers for you all."

"Ah…now that's nice. You tell your Pappy that we appreciate his sentiments and we're praying for his own health."

"That's very gracious, Maid Gamine. Considering the recent animosity between both our Immediates."

"Well…" A pause widened as Mammy searched for words. Her voice sounded thick and sort of without life, Ry-anne thought. "In light of recent events, some things don't seem so important now, do they?"

"That's true."

"Well…" There was the sound of kissing and more pleasantries before Markooth finally emerged. His eyes seemed sort of wide and shocked. He looked very serious.

"Hello Ry-anne."

"I told Mammy we were still Pairs."

He nodded and leaned against the decorative table. "I gathered that."

Ry-anne rubbed her nose hard with her palm. When she dropped her hand, wiping it near the neckline of her robe, she had to stifle a scream. Markooth's face was, quite literally, black and blue.

"Oh!" She sucked in a breath. "You look like a monster—why didn't you look like that before?"

He frowned and touched the tips of his fingers to one swollen cheek. "You see this? The illusion spell I used was very complex. I hope nobody else can see it."

Ry-anne shrugged. "Probly they can't, but I'm your best friend aren't I?"

Markooth looked at her, as he smiled the best he could without cracking the scabs on his busted lip. "Are you indeed?"

"Yup. And you're my best friend—well, 'cept for Gwyneth…when she's not with Davvy."

Markooth nodded. "That's good to know."

"So how comes I never got bruises this time?" Ry-anne rose and sat on the desk next to Markooth. He flinched slightly as their arms touched and moved to give her some room.

"Because I put a protection spell on you."

Ry-anne swung her legs back and forth. "Oh. I'm good at spells too. Maid Fatbottom told me so. Want to know what she said? She said I showed 'ingenuity and forward thinking'—I tried

to add time to a good health spell, you see. Didn't actually manage it but, well, never mind. She was very impressed that I'd even thought of it."

"That's wonderful. It really is. Now you only have to work on your mentals."

Ry-anne gave him the evil eye. "You're wicked—I'm not that bad, you know." Shooting through the air, rain like icicles, freezing my eyeballs trying to see Kyna and get her away from the man…that…man.

Markooth must have followed her line of thought. She didn't think he'd read her, he'd just thought the same thing. That's what Pairs did, she thought proudly.

"Did you really say Maid Fatbottom? Is that her real name?" Markooth asked.

"Well no, but—" Kyna's still dead and that crow man took her—for what?—and he wanted Ry-anne too. Would be waiting, waiting, waiting…

"Ry-anne? You look pale."

She lowered her head and let the tears slip out. "I killed Kyna," she whispered.

Markooth swallowed loudly. "Ry-anne that's…"

"I never even wanted to take her to the Fishing village in the first place. I know I'm not very good at mentals and I'd just got battered about in class and was supposed to practice before meal room—so the girls wouldn't laugh at me next time. But there was Kyna twisting her curls and faking like she was so cute and she made me take her there, Markooth. It wasn't my idea. She made me—her and Mammy Helene."

"Ry-anne you shouldn't—"

"And so it was a horrible day wasn't it and any lazy horse could tell it was going to rain, right? But no, not Kyna. She forgot her overrobe but she gets away with it by playing all dumb. Mammy Gamine'd slap my legs if I didn't take my overrobe on a day like that but o' course Kyna always gets away with it. So I had to give her my overrobe and I said…I said…" Ry-anne bit down sharp on her bottom lip and sniffled. Her nose stung from tears. Tears dripped down her chin and dropped onto her robe, staining the fabric a darker white.

"You needn't talk about this Ry-anne."

"No but," she looked up at him, brows knitted. "You don't know what I said. I said…" She shook her head fast. "I can't say it."

Let me look. Send it to me.

Taking a deep breath, Ry-anne tried to relax her natural barriers and suddenly felt Markooth closer then than any touch.

Send it.

Ry-anne focused and sent out the words that she knew she could never speak. Markooth channeled her emission, squashed its frequency, gently teaching her not to send so broad. I said I'd kill her if she got my overrobe dirty—and she did. I killed her.

Markooth drew up straighter and the table creaked. At another time, Ry-anne would have laughed and teased him about his bottom making a funny noise, but she let this one pass. He shook his head. "No." That was all he said.

Her eyes grew frightened. "You musn't tell Mammy Gamine and Pappy Johann what I did. They wouldn't love me no more. Please, Markooth!"

Markooth was still shaking his head. You didn't do anything wrong.

Ry-anne was still crying inside when she felt Markooth start to softly color her mood warmer, brighter. She looked at him, needing to know. "I didn't?"

"No." It was definite.

Ry-anne gave him a hesitant, watery smile and stupidly tried to return his warmth. His legs crumpled beneath him, and he kicked the chair leg, sending the stool sprawling and clattering over, swiftly followed by Markooth who knocked his head off the table's unkind corner.

"Holy Grand!" were his last anguished words.

He sandy eyelashes fluttered as he tried to keep his eyes open. But the fight was soon lost and he drifted into unconsciousness.

"Woops."

* * *

The Grand ordered her conscious spirit to the main hall. Markooth lay unconscious outside. Somebody had straightened out his limbs and Lyelle dabbed his forehead, calling for someone to send for a nurse. People crowded around, concern etched on their faces. But the boy was fine, albeit a little damaged. He'd be right by the eve after he had slept off that particular bump. Little Ry-anne flitted around the edge of the tight circle of nosey-know-nothings, trying to squeeze in and get a look at what was going on.

Madrea chuckled heartily and willed her way back to her body. She opened her eyes in a zip and chuckled heartily in the old chair. "That girl. Oh my…" More shaking of the head. "That clumsy, clumsy child."

Not that she cared, but Madrea sometimes wondered whether the guards outside heard her laughing and talking to herself. Did they shift about uncomfortably, glance at each other, flick their eyebrows up and clear their throats? She could go and see of course, but it was best to leave some things to wonder. After all, it was no fun knowing absolutely everything.

So it had been a successful chapter, the Grand thought to herself. Time to close the book on the pair of them for a while, although she would still keep up to date on the story, of course. But the Grand was pleased with the way the girl was being shaped. The next milestone in her life would not come for a good few seasons, but when it was time, Madrea would once again pick up this girl's book of life, and continue to write…

To be continued in the September 2003 issue of Deep Magic...

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